Light 1. Ami in the hole

Ami walked to the edge of the forest, thoughtful.

The light was gloomy, but inside, it seemed, a luminary of hope began to rise. An annoyed kantinian waved it away.

“Please roll back into the swamp. And don't show your face again. How many times have you done this suddenly, when it seemed that I was going to succeed? How many times have I had this vain hope”...

... However, the news was interesting...

The Temples of Prime, Omill, Kantine and Zeth exchanged service people.

“To improve networking and simplify interactions,” is written in the general message. Well... A very vague formulation, what can one say.

But you don't give a damn if you've been chosen to represent the Kantine Department.

And we have to go to Omill! Not bad! To put it mildly...

And it’s absolutely awesome when you are ready to go literally anywhere, just not to stay here.

What does Ami remember about Omill from her last business trip?

It's a pretty quiet and nice place, there's not much lawlessness and the Temple staff is small. They are mainly involved in logistics, checking and accounting for cargo passing through town and patrolling the local woods to see if anyone has got lost or into trouble...

Something like that. Sounds a bit boring. But truly anything is more fun than the usual local land disputes and accounting for food shipments in caravans.

... Exchange of service people, hmm.

Some of these poor losers will end up here. Although for many, this is not such a big problem. There is even such a concept as the 'simple life', which people from all over the Mainland come to Kantine in search of.

To live freely, to build one's own big house in the middle of vast fields. To work for oneself on one's own plot of land, to be dependent on no one, to grow one's own food, to eat heartily, to admire nature at sunset, to sleep well after a hard light. To communicate with ordinary people, simple,

straightforward hard workers, nothing extra...

At least that's what it looked like in theory.

Ami's life did not resemble this bookish idyll at all. She avoided construction sites, harvesting and socialising. Maybe that's why life here has never been “easy” for her.

Perhaps for some people, it was a good idea to calm down after an eventful life. But for the young, active Ami who was born here and had already had enough of this “simplicity" and predictable regularity, this was the real “complexity“.

In addition to external conflicts, it was torn apart by numerous internal ones. Excessive “peace” also does terrible things to people. Especially those who are not yet ready for it. Those who have not yet had enough of all the worries that distract those who are not yet ready to calm down and watch the chthonic monsters that live there begin to emerge from the depths of their souls...

Probably, Ami’s “replacement”, who will arrive from Omill, will be somewhat similar to Ami herself, who loves courier work, does not disdain operational work and knows not only her native language.

However, it is not difficult to learn the most popular languages: Kantinian, Omillian, Zetish and Primish. They are grammarly so close to each other that it is unclear how learning languages could even become a problem for someone.

Only if this one doesn’t want to. Or a group of people, not finding other, more constructive points of contact, decides to form a “commune of the chosen ones” on this basis.

So… Primish language is the closest to Kantinian. The language of the persecuted witches has not deviated much from the original. The differences were only in a number of words - their pronunciation and use. And they are just as big as in other languages, and not as big as the Kantinians wanted to show with all their appearances, demonstrating that they do not understand the speech of strangers at all.

“Can’t these clayheads speak normally! Why distort our words so stupidly? Sounds like a moron.” - was the aunt's vivid indignation.

At a young age, as was her sad habit, the addicted Amelia was unable to choose one language and had begun to study them all at once. The textbooks were hard to find, but nothing is impossible if you set your mind to it. You can find it even in the shed of your house.

So, with youthful enthusiasm, Amelia set about studying everything she could get her hands on, and soon began to confuse languages, unconsciously switching from one to the other, causing another barrage of ridicule.

Even not mentioning this, Ami was already considered quite strange.

But the purpose was to make some efforts to end up speaking only Kantinian. She wanted to see the whole Mainland.

It is true that her pronunciation of non-native languages left much to be desired, as she taught them from old, half-decayed books that she was only able to find in the city Archives thanks to her perseverance.

And… with a huge help of notes from mother found in the barn. Which she was generally forbidden to approach. But once again her persistence paid off.

Then… another difficulty arose. Well, where without it . There was nowhere and no one to practise on.

For obvious reasons, aliens rarely appeared in Kantine, which was unfriendly to neighbouring witch cities. So Amelia had to grow up, enter the service of the Kantine Department of the Order, and give herself the opportunity to continue her own education. She acted as a courier between the towns, accompanying the trade caravans, and asking them for some assistance.

She was in the service of all kinds of business trips. It was the only one of her initiatives that her own department was enthusiastic about.

But still, it was beyond their comprehension. How could anyone want to tear themselves away from their native fields, drag themselves through hunger and lack of comfort to gnats knows where? Then they waste precious time on such nonsense as studying those idiotic, distorted dialects of those filthy “for-the-next-eternity-not-to-see-their-faces” witches. There were few. To be more precise, there were practically no such people willing.

And now… Well. Theoretically. Sort of… Kinda…

For Ami, there is the opportunity to go for half a big cycle with joy, envy and curiosity to have a close look at the life of such interesting and attractive “filthy witches” and to improve her language skills in Omill.

The vagabond always carried a few dried beans and a few trinkets from her travels to remind her that her way of life wasn't the only way. There are other ways. More interesting,

more joyful, more meaningful.

Somewhere, even if it is hard to find now, there is freedom and fresh new knowledge. And the main thing is not to stop jumping.

One light you can reach it by pumping your muscles. Or you can grow into it. Or you can accept failure, but first do your best.

“Yes. It doesn't hurt to dream… It hurts a lot to fall back from a cloud. Nothing will work out again. It’s obvious. How many times has it happened that everything is going to get better, and... the bag is full of holes and gnat swamps. And no improvement of the situation at all... Our fate is still a sadistic humorist”.

Dreaming is good in this case.

Especially when life has squeezed you so tight that you can't even move, and there's nothing left but to dream. And if you really want to dream...

Then why not talk about Prime right away.

... Prime.

Ami closed her eyes.

The chic, charming city seemed like the ideal place to start a new life.

There is always a whiff of something that will provide her with a meaningful, promising and interesting existence and a worthy future.

The prospects are vast, like the unforgettable view from the cliff on which the city was built, of the endless Ocean and the equally endless and beautiful bottomless sky above. All this gave an exhilarating sense of freedom and unlimited possibilities in this incredible corner of the Continent. It is said that in the cold season, when there’s no clouds and no fog. From this height of a Mountain Prime you could see the Continent from the Wastelands almost all the way to Zeth, and even draw a map of it... Many who were able to catch this rare moment probably did.

To see the rest, one had to descend from these dizzy heights and go into the Northern Wastes beyond the high hills to Youlle or the Elven Forest. Then walk to Zeth and look over Mount Omill, go through the Great Forest.

But even if you don’t go far, Prime is a place where you can get a lot of information about anything in the Mainland without leaving the city. Practically, we can say that this is such an awesome enormous Archive.

It is not established with certainty who was more

hungry for knowledge—the Prime academic witches or Ami, but the first ones, unlike her, had exactly what everyone needed. Information, which they painstakingly gathered from all possible sources and poured into the Prime Central Archive in deliciously wide streams and the Royal and University Libraries.

Knowledge here was truly power and wealth. Prime was not only a place to obtain information of a scientific, technical and magical nature, but also a large Market for trading information from all over the Mainland.

This was done by large, almost monarchical organisations like the VST Agency, as well as influential scientists and royal families, small offices and private intelligence agencies. Everyone who could was trying to find something, to find out something, to make a discovery, to profit from something... Of course, this was not without its intrigues and rivalries among the competitors.

Primers are obsessed with knowledge and information, and as it turned out, it was a valuable resource, thanks to which the city lived and prospered.

... Even for Amelia, who had no practical use for it, whose ever-hungry, inquisitive mind was in desperate need of new stimulation and nourishment, this approach was close at hand. Prime is the perfect place for people like her.

A city of ageless students. Ami walked for a long time between the buildings of the educational institutions, mingling with the crowds of students, anxiously hurrying somewhere, imagining that she was also hurrying somewhere, alone. For something meaningful and interesting... What can you get now if you go into one of those carved towers, get a stack of tablets full of tasty knowledge and disappear from this world, swept away by an exciting stream of new, tasty information. Like a speck of dust in the rays of light passing through those beautiful, infinitely varied, multicoloured windows of which there were so many in this City...

…The Kantinian sighed dreamily.

This is life! Damn it. Somewhere... Where she is not.

Well… Let's return to some positive and pleasant thoughts, if there are any.

About food. Food for a stomach, not just food for thoughts. Food is fine, you can't go wrong with it.

Prime includes chic restaurants and refectories. Local magical fruit dishes, famous for strange and unusual combinations, refined and simple, traditional and regularly

appearing innovative, which were an eternal reason to snort for those who preferred simple and satisfying vegetable dishes from the Kantine. If Ami had enough dried herbs and grains to trade, and enough time to try everything... she would probably go mad with happiness, because there would be no more pipe dreams in her life.

Eating and wandering around the city had always been her favourite pastimes.

Here, the pleasure was multiplied tenfold. An incredibly bizarre architecture, Om houses that could hardly be mistaken for dwellings, a fairy-tale city that could already boast of magnificent views beyondeven on the approaches to the city, with a huge number of coloured stripes of fabric and ribbons stretching across the streets, fluorescent plants of different colours and glowing witch lanterns that looked absolutely fantastic at sunset, attacking the visual receptors with a rainbow of coloured pebbles on the paved paths. Incredibly beautiful stained-glass windows and shining glaze covering the buildings complete the picture perfectly.

An enchanting, hypnotic sight that for a long time took away the will and the desire to live... somewhere else.

The Om houses themselves and their interiors were the main source of pride for those who owned them. Everyone tried to build something fundamentally new and different from their neighbours. As a result, the shapes varied - from buildings that looked more like strange vegetables or local sweets, to transparent structures, looked like the crystals of the Zeth Mountains, they all attracted the eye for a long time. Witches could take some liberties with reality.

All this was already amazing, even if one had never seen one of the bright and abundant local festivals with all kinds of entertainment and delicacies...

Ami sighed enviously.

... Prime also meant for her five unsuccessful attempts to settle there, the complete collapse of all hopes for the aforementioned bright future and a dull resignation to the dark present...

“I'm going to sit here, in this beautiful place near my personal swamp, and I'm not going anywhere. I've had enough of this...”

Ami reached her only true love in these places - the soothing green edge.

... When she was a teenager, her parents threatened her to be taken to the edge of the forest and given to the elves, if

she continued to be naughty. When she grew up, she did not stop being naughty. And also began to come to the Forest herself, hoping that the elves would take her.

Of course, no miracle happened. Again.

But Ami found a wonderful place for herself, which helped her a lot to come to her senses and calm down.

Thoughtfully, Kantinian sat down on the log, slided down to a comfortable half-lying position, and exhaled, staring at the sky and the treetops...

... This place consoled her every time she came here with confused feelings, it was the only being that understood her, giving her, if not rest and inspiration, then mind saving indifference to the world.

...which helped her not to go mad after each successive failure...

She had already internally agreed to this swamp, a “pit” with slippery slopes, having decided in some kind of humble detachment that if she sits here until the end of her time, then so be it.

Without wasting any more strength and nerves, she will do it with maximum indifference.

She will not struggle to climb and slide down again.

... Everything is pointless. Everything is meaningless...

Everything in this life.

And Ami gave up her long-held idea of running away from here, and let herself be drawn into a boring daily routine in the form of her relatives, into plans to renovate their shared house. They lived with their whole large, unfriendly family, according to the bad old Kantine tradition.

And... That's it. Sometimes it’s just simple like that and there’s nothing else.

…And it was definitely the Bottom…

Now Amelia knew what it looked like. And could examine its slippery, viscous base in detail. Feel with her cheek the wet, viscous cold of despair slowly seeping into her core...

For there she lay, face down, turning away from the hideous, eternally inaccessible light of hope shining from above.

... Remarkable cosmetic procedures, you know. Quite effective.

Nothing is scary or unnerving. The frost is an excellent painkiller. Her life is over.

The body moves, breathes and fusses, but there is a

grave cold and stillness inside it. Everyone's gone. To a better place. Empty body, empty mind. No more bold ideas. No more tries. It has not led to good results.

What's left will perform tasks and do what is necessary, but no more.

So Ami has escaped. Mentally.

'Wake her up when it's over'.

This breakdown came after her failed attempt to get a job in Prime.

Was it her fault? Yes and no. If she had witchcraft skills, things could be different, she could be a student or a service woman in any witch city she likes.

She wouldn't even have to escape her hometown. She would have simply been thrown out of here by her neighbours and relatives. And they would even give us some food for the journey. Exile would at least be an unequivocal, direct and explicit rejection. No half measures, no manipulations.

They just go. There's not that awkward case when nobody's interested in your presence, but nobody wants you to leave. Your relatives and homeland suddenly desperately need you. You might be useful in different weird ways. To look better against your background at least.

Since time immemorial, all Kantinians with witchcraft gifts have been banished.

"Don't expect any good from a witch," they said.

Well. Ami would expect. She was jealous of the exiled witches.

It could be like an endless party. You were kicked outside the Kantine and there's no choice - stay in the familiar warmth of your swamp or get out - but one - where to go next.

Most chose obvious Prime to develop their skills and find a new place in their suddenly broadened horizons.

Exiled ones became the very witches, whose services proud Kantinians used in critical cases, forgetting about their dislikes and beliefs, their 'unshakable' traditions that were the bedrock of family and society.

Yeah. Comfort is much more important.

Ami could be one of the fortunate few… no, she couldn't. Don't believe the ones who tell you you can do everything. No you can't.

Because life is life and everything's not that optimistic and joyful as it first seemed, that's what you learn when you grow up.

Without work, there is nothing to do in any big city. If you do not benefit the place and its inhabitants, no one will register you as a citizen or give you temporary accommodation.

Parasites are not welcomed anywhere. And as an ignoramus, you will soon find yourself back in the Kantine, again and again, and there is enough work for everyone, plenty of agrarian jobs in one of the largest city-states.

(and the most boring. According to Ami).

Of course, there are other options... Zeth, Lim and... just a deep Forest. Here, without human society as the main source of constant stress, everything gets easier .

The outcast feels kind of loved and supported here. Finally. Don't know why, but it's fine not knowing, it's just fine here.

All these jumps, antics and attempts to escape or settle down somewhere else now look simply ridiculous. It's good to be here. Sociophobic Amelia had troubles with people. And people are in every city. And so the problems are.

It won't magically get better anywhere except in the forest, of course. She knew it somewhere deep inside. Everything will be the same in Omill and everywhere else.

She will bring herself and her depression everywhere. It will never be easier anywhere she goes.

New attempts to catch on and adapt, new awkward situations that contribute to uniformly covering oneself with shame from head to toe. Not as plentiful as on the first visits... but still in a fairly thick layer.

There's no magic land and no perfect people. She will always be just a rejected weirdo everywhere. For everyone. Because it is how it is.

That's why the main skill is to choose yourself, no matter what. Be the closest to yourself, because there is no one closer.

At least this thing is under control. So. One can come to terms with all this.

At least she has a home. At least she has a job. At least she's an adult and can already argue a lot. And if she tries (to bite her tongue sometimes basically), she could even be finally accepted by family and neighbours.

And this seems to suit everyone. Her relatives have the workforce, and Ami has some stability. And she's not disgracing herself more than usual here. It happens in old familiar ways.

So be it. She is still a Kantinian and values comfort and safety too. More than any abstract things.

Is this adulthood? Hmm. A frightening prospect, if you look at the local adults, faded from hard work and monotonous life.

That's why this damned medium-urgent appointment to Omill looks double tempting, even if it contradicts a previously made "mature" decision...

What did she feel when the opportunity she was looking for came to her and poked her into her hands?

Grief. The most real grief. Intense bitterness and all-consuming resentment.

And now, more than anything else, she would like to throw this unsolicited handout from fate back into her maliciously laughing face.

"Take it and choke. Why even bother?! Why now?! I accepted my way and my life. I'm weak and tired. And desireless. There's no joy or passion in it anymore... It's pure mockery."

But… Don't be so bitter. Maybe we shouldn't. It's a… small mockery, you know. Just for half a large cycle…

…That's enough to make gnats laugh!..

What can be accomplished in half a cycle?!

"Ah… really. What? Well… for example...

You could come back to admire the wonderful giant landmark mushrooms, lovingly grown in the city by witches, softly shimmering in different colours at sunset.

Drink refreshing drinks with local water..."

Yesss… By the way, the difference is striking! Sacred water, revered even by elves we have never seen, gives to all omillian dishes and drinks a special, unique fresh and slightly sweet taste. You won't find anything like this anywhere, not joking.

"That's my point."

... May it all fly away to bog with gnats and swampers, anyway...

"Hold your gnats, Amelia. Do you remember that amazing huge lake?"

Of course she did. One can never forget such magnificence.

A huge pool of delicious life-giving water near the mountain. It inevitably made this city the capital of drinks and a place of pilgrimage for all those who tried once and became obsessed with Omill's coffee.

Of course, the famous Omill green and ground coloured coffee was delivered to all the cities of the Mainland... But it lost a huge share of its flavour bouquet and witchiness, being served not fresh, just picked, not with local water and not according to any old selva recipe. And, on her own behalf, Ami would add that without being drunk at a street table in one of the many coffee shops in Omill under a huge landmark mushroom decorated with coloured lanterns. And also without local sweets — pressed from wild nuts, cereals, and berries.

... And let it all fall into the swamps...

“Ami? Can I talk to Ami, please?”

… Eat all the six-mouthed monsters…

“I already got the point. Stop it. How about… admiring the dark-skinned, smiling, joyful and slightly arrogant selvas?”

They are good looking ones. And, as if this were not enough, they are great singers and dancers, weavers, coffee makers... all of them are witches. It’s not a reason to go there, it’s a reason for envy, actually.

The internal dialogue was displaced by Ami's memories.

These witch people didn’t live or come to Kantine often. The Kantinian still remembers how surprised and enchanted she was the first time seeing a living selva. It was rude to stare, but book pictures didn’t give any idea of what the selvas were really like. It's... Like the difference between a map and a landscape.

Well, ghouls are with this damned appointment. Let it be.

Who is she trying to cheat? She will gladly get away from here again. Even being indifferent and powerless. Even if it's not for a long time.

She will just go, just because. Whatever. Even for appearance's sake. Just go there and come back with a dejected look: “I didn’t succeed again. It is fine.”

It’s not her coveted Prime, but at least it’s something.

…Damn Mother Universe with her stupid manner of care, feeding us not with something “tasty” we want, but something that corresponds to her perverted ideas about “healthy”...

…but “it is fine” again.

So, as it seems, despite the violent internal protests and seething hatred, there were obviously many good reasons for going to Omill.

What made Ami especially happy was that she would supposedly leave Kantine before the start of the Fertility Festival, hated to the point of gnashing teeth.

She almost forgot about it. Then… It was worth a lot!

It was even possible to simply go to Omill under this pretext and quickly come back here after that to continue to rot here.

At least minus one time of stupid songs, forced fun, accelerated by ale, unfunny jokes and inappropriate and unpleasant signs of attention and literally sickening round dances!

Good good. What could be better for the psyche than the absence of odes to one's own unwanted fertility. This place already has enough of all types of fools.

"It's not the city's fault that you feel bad here. And not people. They get along well with each other. It's like you're something foreign here." — she reminded herself. - "And not everything is black and white. This city has its own virtues. Here, in the Mainland's food capital, you can be sure of tasty, nutritious food in abundance, quiet sunsets, walks in the Forest and flowery streets."

Alrighty, but in order to try to avoid one Fertility Fest, one could agree to almost anything. Now we have no doubts.

Yes, it's a big light for the locals. Many people look forward to it, and decorate their houses with bouquets of beautiful leaves and carved fruits, and prepare special foods and drinks. They get beautiful tablecloths and draperies, and dress themselves up too. Almost everyone here enjoys the lively jamboree, even people from neighbouring towns come to see it. Ami saw enough.

What kind of allergy is it? What's so terrible about it? Why was she clinging to it now, when it was just happening in her head? Why not just walk by indifferently if you're not really interested? Otherwise it means you're still "interested", you know, but in a perverted way. What is she resisting? Why?

No answers. But she can't deny her eagerness to stay away from these pleasures. And she's a great master of playing dead.

If something is systematically imposed on her, she will do her best to systematically avoid it.

Additional reason to escape the Fertility Festival is that those lights made their mother nervous too. And even more withdrawn. This was something they had in common, but it

didn't bring them together at all.

Every big cycle Yvette simply locked herself in her room with a supply of food, tea, and… a hygiene bucket. And no amount of screams, threats, or persuasion from her relatives could lure her out of there.

However, persuasion-threats-screams were another festive tradition, repeated from cycle to cycle, as stable as the very presence of a swamp Festival.

No one planned to stop it. Everyone seemed to love this boggy theatre.

Even the dialogues have not changed over time. Immortal recognized classic. And nobody ever got tired of this unfresh scenario.

The mother was asked not to disgrace herself in front of her neighbours. She answered in a calm voice that she would not disgrace herself, since from here she would not be able to greatly harm everyone who congratulated her on her still fertile age and the ability to reproduce further. She only went out at night to empty the bucket and threatened to douse its contents on anyone who interfered with her self-isolation.

Ami winced.

Every cycle of her life she felt as if she had already been doused from this same bucket. Desire to quickly remove herself far far away from home and the glorious traditions, ancestral memory and great city became almost invincible again. To find herself as far as possible from the concentration of those toxic things that already killed her morale.

Far away from the comfort of home. From the family bonds. From the mother with this permanent verbal and non-verbal hygiene bucket. Great.

On the other hand Amelia couldn't say she doesn't understand mother's behaviour. It was probably painful for the older failed tramp to see her mistakes and especially one read-headed ridiculous reflection. No matter how hard she tried to forget who she was before, she wasn't successful.

One can't cheat one's soul. She had to look. She had to look at all of them. Her past mistakes. Amelia was one of three. Mother made them systematically. For what's sake? One never knows.

Maybe she believed that this would transform her from a fractious tramp into a respectable citizen. Maybe she wanted to be accepted in the house of her husband and in the city in general. But she didn't succeed either.

And with new hope she switched to the desire to see

her daughters become respectable plant growers and mistresses of the house and fields, she had never become herself.

Quite a dysfunctional family. Though… not everyone here was a failure.

Ami's sisters were much more promising individuals. They fit well here.

Aunt Tata took her part in raising strong in body and spirit peasant women and hard workers.

For some reason this not-magic didn't work with Ami. A bad seed. You can't slap genes with a slipper, the mother should only be displeased with herself.

Can't say Tata abandoned the attempts. Although nothing could be cut out of the grown-out part, persistent methodical attempts to tear it into shreds and sew it together in a new way were periodically renewed.

That's why Ami tried to show herself as little as possible. Not to catch the eye of her family became her main goal, and she reached it by disappearing at work, in the Archive or, if she was really lucky, on a business trip.

And at her favourite secluded edge of the Forest, of course.

Under this delightful starry sky, among the trees and on the moss-smelling earth. Where one can stop to pretend "normal", or try to hide away from everyone or to please someone if they got "caught".

Isn't it a wonder... This is probably only possible in communication with nature.

Everything is easier here. Just wander aimlessly and sing along with the voices in your head. The Forest will take you as you are, alive or dead, it doesn't demand you to change, to "make an effort" and "stop being a bungler", to behave, to be "as you should be" so that "it wouldn't be ashamed in front of the sky" or something.

The Forest smelled wonderful and looked great. Maybe they must move to a Forest sometime. It has food and answers to almost everything. Perhaps they would do it in the end, because none of the other cities like her either.

Or they can travel to the Ocean! Some maps say there's a real unimaginably huge Ocean on the other side of the Forest! Imagine!

No, you can't. Boundless spaces are hard to imagine. You have to see it for yourself.

Great thing is to look for elves who rush around here

on their unknown business also. Ami's never seen them ever in her life, but would really like to…

Well. Coming back to now. Still anxious. Why?

My eternally alert anxious mind, pray tell me what else you have in store? Let's pour it out.

"Alrighty… What if… someone else is sent to Omill instead of us?"

Ha-ha. And ha. Who? There are no other weak-minded people in the area.

Everyone has business in their houses and plots, fields, families. No one wants to mess with these "helpless, clueless, stupid" witches. Nobody wants to adapt to new people, new language, new circumstances, new everything, no one wants to look ridiculous, feel the lack of the usual and necessary and the abundance of the incomprehensible. It's a daily basis just for us.

It works here and there because nobody bothers to tell us what's wrong, they need us to guess. So it's a daily occurrence that we say and do something weird. It's a daily basis of us suddenly becoming annoying troublemakers, even if we didn't mean it, and most of the time we didn't mean it, and having no clue what part of what you say or do is a trigger. A knowledge could at least be useful for analysis.

But even asking and analysing didn't help and just made things worse. It's a strange world. But maybe it's a cursed gift to be a stranger anywhere in it.

Maybe.

So… Although her candidacy had not yet been officially approved, it was clear from the faces of our colleagues that they were relieved that it almost happened. In this situation, Ami was the invincible Stella the Clayhand. With whom no one fights. What's next?

"Suns will rise."

Wait? Really? Aye.

The first night lights appeared above the edge of the forest. If you sit a little longer, you can see how shining stars float into the sky on trails with a haze between them.

Perhaps it's better this way… she doesn't want to come home. She's barely managed to calm down. And too weak to repel the attacks of her nosy loving family.

The fugitive didn't want to listen again and again to the story about the complications with the roof repair due to her developed egoism and the lack of her not so skillful hands, la-di-da... If she is sent somewhere again, then most likely she

wouldn’t return to the beginning of a new stage of (useless) construction and so on, and so on...

One answer to all of this is diligent passive-aggressively shirking. What? What did they expect from a careless mistress?

She was perfectly happy with the look and size of the house and her room. Enlarging the house and expanding their family would be extremely undesirable for many reasons. This family is already big enough to be disastrously annoying. And the house itself was sound and only needed cosmetic repairs.

Also there are much more interesting things in this life than getting bogged down in unnecessary things. So, whoever requires it… let them do this useless work.

And Amelia will wait until everyone falls asleep. It's a good thing that Kantinians traditionally go to bed early, because the next morning most of them had a new light of work in the fields and gathering in the woods.

On the other hand, Ami's habits did not exempt her from getting up early for work with everyone else. May the ghouls in the swamps gnaw at those who devised this routine so deadly to the body. And it’s not the first time she has anxious insomnia.

And not the last. She will survive anyway. Just like she did before.

Until she wouldn't. Then she just wouldn't. Why try to fight the inevitable?

Next one.

“Our superiors decide that the witches have come up with yet another stupidity, and they shouldn't pay attention to this, nor to follow their lead… Or they will suddenly find out that there are not enough people here in the Department. And they desperately need this useless one. Or the Omillians will finally understand that working with an ignoramus is of no interest to them...”

Amelia didn’t answer, smirking vindictively at invisible Fate, demonstrating with her whole appearance that nothing would be able to disappoint her anymore.

It was simply ineffective and pointless to panic and freak out when you were already at the very bottom of your life's expectations.

Instead, you need to keep your mind and hands busy. By starting to pack things, for example. It feels like escaping, it's calming, and that's exactly what we need. Even if the authorities don’t plan us to move to Omill tomorrow. Anyway,

it’s time to finally go home and have some sleep.

The servicewoman stood up abruptly and reluctantly walked towards her dwelling. All the moons were hidden by clouds, and it was difficult to see the path, but the road was so familiar to her that she could walk there with her eyes closed if she wanted.

Literally. She tried. I only tripped a couple of times. She saw well in the dark.

Although, of course...

... The witch could now illuminate her way. Or stay away from these places.

The Kantinian quickly reached the partly undesired destination and quietly slipped inside. Luckily, there was no one in the corridor.

The tramp exhaled with relief.

She hurried into her room, hastily closing the door behind her.

The apathy that had become habitual in recent cycles was replaced by a weak but noticeable, somewhat malicious and gambling enthusiasm.

Let's gooo! Now we're talking.

Not hoping, not planning this time, just packing a bag full of our favourite things.

The unfortunate plant grower jumped to her feet a little energetically, glanced around the room eagerly and began to hum softly, unconsciously.

Interesting… She didn't make it anywhere out of the Forest for a long time. She doesn't sing in captivity.

Freedom seemed so close and almost tangible. But it was not the first time that she had been misled by her feelings and that her desires had been mistaken for reality.

Amelia quickly shook off the darkest storm cloud of depression that was creeping back into her soul.

Don't get distracted... What to take and what to leave? Hm.

…The dictionary is definitely going in the bag first.

The avid bookworm picked up a large, tattered bundle of roughly stitched cloth. She turned it over respectfully, as if weighing it.

It had once belonged to her mother. Back when, according to unconfirmed rumours, she was still a normal person and not a swamp ghoul who had replaced her later. It is not clear where she got the copy, but you will not find a better source of information in Kantine. In fact, it was

priceless. Any similar literature stored in the local Archives was almost completely useless. It is difficult to say why this was the case and what dominated these works - the number of errors or irrelevant topics.

This rare, valuable copy will come in handy. Because no matter how much you learn a language, you will still fall into a stupor when you need to say something immediately. Mean words quickly flee the battlefield.

And these ones are captured in the book. They have to serve and simply have no choice. And that's why they will always come to the rescue.

Come on, good old tattered fellow... it's not your fault that your ex is a grumpy fury. You are very useful and you will not bear collective responsibility.

Alrighty then. Who's next?

Favourite shoes and clothes, of course. All travellers' first friends. They're comfortable and practical, even if they have holes in them and are sewn and glued over and over where possible. They're in.

In our clothes bags. Which are also spacious and light, handy for any hike.

And an old, trusted, no less beloved blanket. It comes in handy anytime, anywhere. Even for sitting at rest stops.

This and that, we don't take much… Don't think we'll stay long there.

But… have the feeling we're missing something important.

Food. We need food!

The most important and enjoyable part of any event. This little journey is no exception.

Rarely would any Kantinian disagree with it, and in at least one thing Ami agreed with her compatriots. An absolutely sincere love of food.

So it was absolutely necessary to think about what hearty dried food she could steal from the family pantry. And put it in her omillian food bags.

Food bags are critical. She hasn't learnt to wrap food and even drinks in big leaves like the graceful Selvas do.

But it is fiiine. That is not the only thing she will never be able to compare with the Selvas.

Ami took from the drawer the beautiful embroidered bags she had brought from the last Omill trip. It seemed they still had the smell of small flatbreads and takeaway pies. But no. They could only contain the spirit of Omill's coffeehouses.

Hmm... It's such a heartwarming memory... Especially in these dull Lands.

What else? Water bags. Of course.

Coffee-coffee-coffee... And our favourite shell cup, made from the shell of a local nut.

Did we leave our cup at work? Oh no… Let's not forget it tomorrow. We need to make a mark on our hand...

No, we don't! Luckily it's here. On a table, behind the usual clutter. Waiting for something. And it looks like it's getting ready too. Brilliant.

Come on, beauty. We're going for a walk. Far away from here. Once again. I'm not leaving without you, you know that. Soon we will both be filled with exotic, delicious drinks.

Quick dopamine is a nice compensation for the bitterness of another fruitless movement to crawl out of this hole. Good, good…

What else?

Our typical travel checklist is somewhere at the bottom of this mess. Somewhere here, in the chaos of our life. Too tired to look for it, as always. So organised. Internal chaos often turns into external mess, there is nothing you can do about it.

There's a writing tissue, stick and and some juice sticking out of the habitual tabletop clusterflip… Hm. Great. A cheerful company of writing instruments and materials is always welcome. Especially when your own memory isn't too keen on keeping you company.

Amelia quickly walked back to the table and sharply pulled several pieces out of a pile of cut-up writing cloth. And of course what was on the top is immediately scattered on the floor.

Shhh... No noise, no noise...

Ami angrily picked up the out-of-control paper cutter and shook her finger at it. But it wasn't the only troublemaker. The scraps of writing cloth, already covered with drawings, also ended up on the floor. Pieces of a unique map of the Continent made by mother. Her own work, torn and trampled by her own hands…

How symbolic.

Ami winced as if from a sudden spasm. The eternal victim of her own curiosity, she didn't even want to recall the very episode, and quickly suppressed the feelings of guilt and anger and shoved them into a travel bag along with the pieces of the map.

…Maybe we can do something about that in the end, you know. If Ivette's too weak to finish her own job.

For the Lands of Normality lie beyond and above the fertility-specialised Kantine. And there, with the proper sources of varied information, we could surely find the knowledge and materials to restore this undervalued treasure. And to reunite these disparate pieces of the former mother's personality.

Or even, joking aside, we'll be able to add something to it. Not in a negative way.

Perhaps Ami the Misfortune could still fulfil her mother's wishes and live up to her hopes. But not by becoming a decent plant breeder, but by becoming a decent researcher. Of course, she is a far cry from her mother, but considering how tightly the “advanced” Yvette is mired in her problems, she has long since ceased to be a worthy rival. And even the desire to compare herself to her has completely disappeared.

Given that Amelia is going to be an employee of the Omill Department of Truth, there must be a way to gain access to the Omill Temple Archives. Perhaps there's some sort of simplified access procedure.

It should not be as difficult to access as, say, Central Prime Archives. In theory.

If she stays in Omill and is not sent back, of course. If it is sent to Omill at all.

“So many “ifs”. Here we are again, feeding our depression and feelings of rejection. Enough of that. It's not relevant. What's next? “

Sleep. Sleep is next. Everything is packed except the food.

Ami doesn't have many things. She doesn't need much. Only the most comfortable. A big travel bag is ready and other things wait for her return.

And she always returns.

Ami clicked her tongue in annoyance, remembering the old "resentment" towards the beautiful and inaccessible cities that did not accept her the first, nor the second, nor the third time.

It is fiiine.

She has to get used to rejection and ghosting, they have been her best and most trusted friends for as long as she can remember. It's time to accept them and stop ignoring their unseen daily presence.

…Mimicking, sarcastic remarks... silent ignoring or smirking... She's had enough of that in her whole dung life. At home, among siblings and others, at work... Big gulps of it, in full abundance, everything you want from this set, Ami, everything is for you…

The Kantinian growled softly from the anger that had surged up and plopped down on the couch with a pile of unpacked things in her hands.

…Wouldn't it be better to crawl somewhere and never come out again, never come in contact with anyone or anything?..

Yes. If only everything was that simple. Anyway, everything is pointless. Everything…

“We're being unproductive again.”

Definitely… It's better not to think about it now.

It's no more but a story. The ridiculous story of one stupid life.

“Surely there are many much more interesting thoughts in that head.”

Right. Some can be rejected, even if they are not just plain weirdos like us, but outstanding people, which the VST agents definitely are. Or, maybe even, they were rejected because of being eminent. Remember that strange case when our Temples compromised its principles by asking the VST to send no less than one of their witch agents. It was a big deal of great importance.

But of course something went wrong and the investigation was inconclusive. Which says nothing about the professional qualities of the agent himself or the level of competence of the VST as an organisation.

One can only imagine the level of "assistance" the locals provide to the "metropolitan upstarts". This makes any complex investigation doubly difficult. If not triple…

…Contempt, devaluation, small-minded pride and arrogance.

An inexplicable fear of the incomprehensible and unexplored. Energy saving mode for limited minds. Why learn when you can project…

To be more educated, more curious, to have superior knowledge was only a reason for additional ridicule. That's what happened to the agent.

Rejected for another reason, Ami deeply sympathised with a stranger.

It's a pity that his investigation didn't take place during

her service - she came later.

Once, under silly circumstances, her curiosity had led her to some interesting lists and reports, which disappeared shortly afterwards. Perhaps they are still somewhere in the depths of the Office Archive... but very deep.

The new employee, Ami, was simply asked to tidy up the shelves here in the absence of the Secretary.

If she knew the real value of these documents, which were temporarily stored away from the other ones... She would examine them more closely.

…Such a fascinating, mysterious puzzle in the midst of the flat, boring life of the Order Department. It was quite intriguing, and she decided to take a closer look at it after carrying out the orders of her superiors with maximum speed and all the zeal of a rookie… If only she had known two important things then.

First, the faster you carry out your superiors' orders, the faster you will get the next ones. Second, secrets and fortune will not wait forever. Either you take it now, or you go your separate ways.

And of course, a late quick inspection of the contents of the shelves revealed nothing. There was no way to snoop any more. The Secretary kept the secrets.

And he would not tolerate any intrusion into his fabric manor. Ami was pretty sure that the agent had found nothing either because it’s been deliberately hidden.

Although she couldn't shake the thought that she could somehow help this random VST guy, who was somewhat similar to her, she understood perfectly well that it was too late to do anything.

The case was closed. And maybe even destroyed.

Even if she could find a way to sneak into the Archives under a good pretext and quickly figure out which of the heavy, dusty cabinets contained the necessary information...

How do you copy a document quickly? Absolutely not. They'll definitely notice.

Of course, neither the Secretary nor the Chief would approve, to put it mildly. And Ami did not want to be thrown out of what was practically the only non-planting job in Kantine that allowed her to travel the Mainland at least occasionally. The job suited the inquisitive mind of the active Amelia, Ami loved her job. In general.

Though, frankly, curiosity and initiative have never been particularly encouraged in their ranks. Which is true of

their whole city.

"This is how they lived before us, this is how we live".

A step in any direction promises a citywide clusterflip.

Somehow, Kantinians have deliberately forgotten that it was curiosity and a passion for research and exploration that made Prime the great and admirable city it was, starting with a bunch of witches hastily and uncertainly settling on a windy mountain plateau.

...to heights beyond the reach of Amelia...

Witches who did not possess the “basic Kantine virtues” declared to be the basis of survival, demonstrated a fundamentally new way of not only surviving, but thriving.

Yes, the Kantinians also look forward with malicious impatience to the fall of the Witch City from its mountain heights, and eagerly discuss all the real and fictional gossip about it.

But unfortunately for them, Prime doesn't fall at all. It just grows and gets better.

"And those stupid witches will lose the game."

Aha. Ami would willingly play along with them.

She didn't know any witches closely, but for some reason she felt that potentially such acquaintances might make her life more interesting. However, she didn’t try to socialise during her business trips to neighbouring cities. Each time, shyness took over and she preferred to familiarise herself with the local food and architecture.

An obvious choice, you can't go wrong here.

The tramp grinned, put aside the things she had been clutching thoughtfully in her hands, and critically examined her more than bulging bags in a total volume comparable to her own size.

Almost everything she needs is here. But will it be possible to lift all these? And even if you manage to lift them, how long will you be able to walk with them on your shoulders?..

After all, the weight of what you are carrying has a nasty tendency to increase with almost every step you take.

Soon everything will be clear.

As clear as a sky in the hot season with three luminaries at the zenith at the same time. In the meantime, she has no intention of taking anything out of her bags.

She might even add more. A food. Something else she forgot.

... Preparing herself as if she were leaving this place for

good, and not just for half a cycle. Ay-ay. Dreams, dreams...

Doesn't matter. The main thing is to go. Away from here.

Just go, when expectations are already smashed to pieces, she is free. Anywhere out there is still better.

Ami threw her bag over her shoulders and tried to walk with it, bouncing slightly.

Well then... No heavier than her daily thoughts.

One thing was totally annoying... The service woman couldn't sleep properly again. Suns will rise soon. And another dreary light will come.

Challenge accepted. Let it try to surprise her.

Light 2. Release the monster!

It... it worked! So... ridiculous.

Sometimes luck is far more discouraging than the usual failure.

When things go well, Ami has great discomfort. What's wrong with everything?!

Nevertheless… Everything started fine. The boss ordered her to leave as soon as possible.

Happily at least once he and Ami had the same aspirations. On this beautiful light, the swamp opened up and spat out Ami like a witch.

Funny thing... not funny, actually. As it turned out, it could have happened a long time ago, but their Department had happily forgotten about the old agreement, and only recently "remembered" it. For some reason.

And now, of course, they're blowing all the deadlines again before they've even started to fulfil anything. Timeless classic. And a standard situation everyone is used to.

Because "there's a lot to do". Especially at harvest time and during the festivals, when everyone is more "active" than usual.

It's good that the agreement was remembered at all. And it's great that it happened so suddenly, so that Ami's family didn't have much time to talk her out of it or blackmail her.

Because "the harvest is not yet in", "the construction is not yet finished", "the festival is coming soon".

Run-run-run. The bag is packed. The food is taken. Messages and documents to be handed over to the Omill’s

Temples as extra weight are here.

The boss has not changed his mind about participating in this "stupid witch's nonsense". One less courier is fine. Fewer dispatches to write and read. It's no big deal.

It feels so good and calm, despite the sleepless nights, the confusion that everything started too well, and the anticipation of new worries. Even if the affair was completely pointless and led to yet another disappointment, she wouldn't complain and couldn't blame herself.

It wasn't her choice. At least she hadn't initiated this fiasco.

Well, at least on the way back the bags will be heavier by the weight of the souvenirs. Heavier by a bag of coffee, for sure. It's a great thing that makes every trip worthwhile.

Ami smiled involuntarily.

"Coffee. Wait for me. I'm on my way."

The business traveller threw her bags over her shoulder, adjusted her clothes so that they wouldn't gather in creases under the straps and looked critically at the apartment she was about to leave.

Everything she wanted to take with her was taken. The rest was tidied up and well packed, the room locked. Her belongings would be safe.

That's all that matters.

Her parents' house stared back at her with its empty window eyes.

Ami's heart tightened for a moment.

It looks so naive, so disappointed, so... unloved. And it felt like a betrayal.

It didn't deserve such an attitude. He gave her his warmth and safety. At least here things are clear, simple and unambiguous.

What to do, what not to do. Who to be and who not to be.

Why does she always leave it so easily and happily? Without a shadow of gratitude? Will it miss her?

It's painful to feel unloved and discarded, but it's also painful to feel that you can't give love and care to something that desperately needs it. Because you just don't have it in you.

Sorry, old boy. Don't be angry with me. I just... can't. Try someone more capable.

So... it was time to wave, try to smile and say goodbye to everyone from afar.

And to hide the unwanted smile on her face and to portray the sadness of parting. She often smiled inappropriately, but there was a good reason not to do so here.

For in half a cycle, or perhaps much sooner, she will return here. And if she has a happy face now, others will have the same wickedly satisfied look when she returns, the echo of her broad happy smile multiplied many times over.

"She didn't crawl far. The place of your birth is the place where you will be of use".

Remembering that would certainly speed up her steps.

Let's run from our local problems to the other ones.

For a moment she had another epiphany.

You can't avoid problems anywhere, no matter how hard and how far you try to run away from them. They can only be resolved by standing up and facing them.

She won't be happy. Nowhere. Ever. There's no such thing like happiness.

There's no such thing as happiness. Why try harder?..

...and. What do you do?

Drop everything? Go back? Lie about being ill? The family will certainly approve. The boss wouldn't mind postponing or cancelling this stupid witch business.

"The Fertility Festival"

Aye...

Ami huffed in annoyance.

Yes. Let's go then... Bye, house, bye, Kantine. Be well.

She turned slowly and carefully, trying to minimise the inertial movement of her heavy bags, and strode out of town, dusting and shuffling her feet along the familiar part of the Great Road.

The Kantine vagabond loved the heavy therapy of walking. It reduced her usual high levels of adrenaline and stopped her messy, chaotic thoughts with fatigue.

Before she could move, she stopped abruptly, swaying under the weight of her load and struggling to keep her balance.

There was one thing she was determined to do. No matter what. And she had no intention of denying herself that pleasure.

It would be nice to see the city with the fresh, unaccustomed eyes of her replacement!

The best way to do this was to climb the hill on the way out of settlement.

Ami carefully dropped her things on the ground and quickly climbed up the hill.

...The settlement looked quite harmless from there. Even... nice.

It was fair to say that despite the unimpressive, squat, plain buildings, it was a very beautiful and charming city. In its own way.

It has fields. Yellow, green, in the colours of the crops.

Ami had never been able to learn all their names, which was reason enough for her immediate surroundings to look at her with some pity.

The scents of fruit and flowers from the gardens reached here too.

There was growth and blossom everywhere. Even on the roofs.

A quiet, measured, delicious and nourishing life. Work that yields a pleasant harvest, pleasing to the eye and the stomach. Peace and stability.

Quiet, peaceful... too peaceful for her.

Perhaps it's her fault. This service woman preferred travelling to operational work because she didn't want to be involved in people's business. And they say it was more or less interesting when she was away. A few cases of amnesia, to be precise. And a missing person at the same time, which is no no particular cause for concern in this Lands. People leave this town from time to time without telling anyone, or get lost in the woods. It's a usual thing.

There's not much to remember in this place, if we're talking about amnesia. lights and cycles are similar, sowing and harvesting, warm and cold winds and the clouds that pass over it all.

Perhaps it could be a strange quest to find yourself again. To get to know life and yourself again. Right here. Right now.

To truly find out who you are, what you want, without outside interference.

But does the wipe mean that your unconscious programmes go away too? If they don't, this is pointless...

Ami didn't have a chance to finish her thoughts as her attention was fully drawn to the dark clouds gathering in the sky above the city, apparently coming from somewhere in the Wastelands.

The Kantinian frowned in unison.

She hadn't noticed them before. They looked

somehow... threatening. Not like normal clouds. At least they made Ami uncomfortable.

Then why look at them. Rain doesn't make a journey any more comfortable. Let's hit the road.

She came down the hill, grabbed her belongings and walked to a wide trade route that led to the next city.

It's an easy journey. You can't get lost here. Not if you try hard enough.

Just walk. And walk. And you'll inevitably find Omill. And what's nice - this time there was no hurry.

Maybe the journey would be more comfortable if she waited for the caravan. But she spent too much time trapped by the home-work route. She really needed some exercise.

And something to chew.

It would make the walk more pleasant. She left the house a moment ago and her appetite was already whetted, as if she'd walked a good part of the way.

She's such a chthonic Glutton. Kantinians were considered gluttons, but who wouldn't be, with all this food? No surprises. They worked a lot, they ate a lot.

The peasant slipped her hand into the small pouch hanging over her belly and fumbled for a large piece of her favourite dried vegetable. She found one, took a good bite and began to chew slowly and contentedly as she walked.

...There must be something good about her homeland.

These vegetables. Such important things seemed so insignificant when they were within reach. But when you suddenly realise that there's no way to get them.

Ami looked carefully at the piece of vegetable in her hand.

"We won't be gone too long. There's plenty in our bags. Anyway, you'll have time to eat them all in a whole Kantine when we get back. Don't you want something new for a change?"

Quite right. She has already eaten here, and here she goes to reduce Omill's stocks of coffee and flat biscuits.

Light 6. A Hot Reception

Amelia appeared vigorously on the doorstep of the Omill Temples Truth Station, clutching the documents she had previously retrieved. It wasn't the first time she'd brought dispatches here.

But these appointment papers...

What position would she be appointed to here? What would she do? Courier again? Translate? Dealing with conflict situations? Search for missing people and property? Escort valuable packages?

Because of her limited knowledge of the language, she couldn't work with the people here. Much to her relief. But as for the other things, she was good enough at her previous job...

Well. There's only one way to find out. And soon everything would be clear.

She walked confidently towards the Secretary's cabin, because it was a habit from previous visits... And suddenly, before she even realised what was happening, her body bounced a decent distance away from... something. Something dangerous.

It was good timing, though.

For a field of barely bearable heat passed by the dazed service woman. Mentally thanking her good reflexes, she looked in surprise at the source of the danger, next to which, without any apparent discomfort, Truth Station Chief Milo walked hurriedly with a concerned look on his face, obviously trying to explain something.

And surprisingly, her potential killer wasn't some kind of fierce-looking villain who had taken over the Truth Station, but a graceful, slender, short figure in the uniform of the Temple Witches.

What a fascinating beginning...

- It's not just our reputation that's been damaged, it's my people who have suffered, don't forget that! - an angry retort filled the air and ears.

How could anyone possibly forget something that had been presented in such a murderously extraordinary way?

The refined witch, the source of the searing aura, raised his long, pale forefinger in a sharp warning and gave the interlocutor a piercing look with his frighteningly bright blue eyes.

- My people are making every effort to reveal it. And you know it.

- Milo tried to put maximum conviction into his words.

Not the best light to pester the boss with your petty affairs. It's not the best light to be here myself... when your instincts are screaming "Run! Hide! Run, run, run..."

“We can't run, we're here on business”.

“Then... hide? Maybe hide? Or freeze. Freeze, don't move... Oh no, get back!"

Amelia wasn't a coward. She had been in many dangerous situations during her service. But there's always something frightening about dealing with raging witches. No matter how much training you've had in your home department and how many techniques you've learnt.

It was good practice, but it was not about "coming from behind", "sneaking up", "stunning", but "retreating quietly" and "hiding quickly".

Nature’s forces stay striking nature’s forces. And Milo is definitely in a bad place right now.

Reflexively, the service woman took up a more or less safe position in the improvised shelter near the exit and cast an appraising glance at the ominous witch.

She... knew him. His name was... his name was Finnian. Right. He's a Head Witch of the Omill Temples Witchery.

Ami had seen him a few times, delivering documents to the Chief of the Omill Temples and picking up what needed to be delivered to their Office of Order and the Kantine Temples in general.

And... a creature of such cold, inhuman beauty that emanated a powerful sense of power, such a combination was almost impossible to forget, she had to say. It leaves a kind of icy scar on the soul, as if from a collision with something incomprehensible and unattainable. And his image was somehow toxic and irreversibly embedded in the memory. Only the proverbial amnesia could help with that.

As the dangerous couple moved past the frozen "don't mind my presence" Kantinian militia woman towards the exit, without even noticing her, she was less and less inclined to the "run and hide" plan of action.

Just in case, she made one more cautious step aside, unconsciously sighing with relief. And found herself involuntarily pulling her head into her shoulders...

...and noticed the edge of the fabric of her documents began to smoulder!

Slightly shocked by the new unexpected extreme situation, the service woman quickly looked around for a remedy to the sudden affliction. A dark-haired man in a Truth officer uniform was holding a cup of greenish liquid.

Amelia quickly dipped ready to flame edges of her document into his cloth saving coffee.

The Omillian raised his surprised gaze to her with a puzzled look of silent disapproval.

- I'm sorry! - Ami quickly gave him her most guilty look. - The naughty witch set fire to my service cloths!

She quickly showed her interlocutor the burnt documents to justify her actions, noting with annoyance the greenish liquid dripping from them.

The only good thing about the situation was that she remembered the foreign language so quickly that she didn't realise it.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw someone fixing a problem with the entrance curtain. It was an impenetrable, fireproof, specially reinforced curtain made of special materials.

What in the ghoul's life is going on here?!

- Why not cool them down, but extinguish them in such a spectacular way? - Fortunately, the officer wasn't angry with her, just curious.

But he already knew the answer. The accent and the telltale pauses, searching for the right word, gave it away immediately.

- I didn't see a quicker alternative... I'm really sorry. Can I at least wash your cup?

- It's all right. - he said nonchalantly, sipping at his drink as if nothing had happened. - Mmm. Smoky... Don't worry. By the way, You could have asked me to extinguish the document.

- I'm subconsciously sure that if I can't do something, no one can. And I'm extremely rarely surrounded by extinguishing witches…

Ami felt colour creep into her face. Yes, this was definitely not the best way to make a first impression when meeting someone you might be working with.

But... this wasn't the first impression. She had met him before too.

Funny thing. She knew a lot of people here, but no one in particular.

- And I think I've seen you here a few times before. - The new acquaintance blinked peacefully. - I'm Davin. Or just Dave. I work here.

- Ami. You'll see more of me lately. Maybe. Watch your feet and coffee. Clumsiness and awkwardness are my best friends. And there's a chance that the three of us will be working here soon...

- I see.

- Look... - Amelia really wanted to change the subject. - Do... Do you get this sort of thing here often?

- Visits from Finnian? - The officer smiled. - Fortunately not... But at least it's not boring.

- That's a mild way of putting it... - Amelia frowned in displeasure. - I was lucky to have your cup nearby.

- Feel free to call on me and my cup for help. Finnian's visits are a serious test for all the Station's furniture. And sometimes people. But... he's a good man.

Dave gave a friendly wink and waddled up to the second floor.

The servicewoman saw him off and exhaled in relief again. Such a nice guy. If everyone here was like that, it would be a lot easier to work.

If she were unlucky enough to find herself in a similar situation in Kantene, she could expect a coffee shower, insults and lectures about her low intelligence level. People here are less picky and more easily offended. The abundance of passive aggression in relationships tells them that they were definitely meant to be insulted.

Yes, it's not easy to be clumsy and stupid, but it seems easier to be stupid anywhere away from home. Poor locals would have to...

“Focus.”

Damn right. We have a job to do.

With a determined exhale, Amelia shook the liquid from her wet papers and made her way back to the Secretary's cabin. Without any deadly obstacles.

Anyway, this place isn’t boring indeed.

- It's a bit noisy... And hot. - she began, trying to put the damaged documents on the small shelf behind the Secretary's window as nonchalantly as possible.

- Yes. A bit fussy, I'd say. - The Secretary accepted the clothes with the same expression.

It seems she's seen more weird things during her time here.

What other oddities could she have encountered in her professional life? It's frightening to even think about.

Fighting back a silly giggle, Amelia looked away.

- Spiced with the smell of coffee and biscuits. - The Kantinian smiled and made eye contact again.

She managed to say something positive.

It's a standard for the locals and she'll have to learn this

skill if she wants to stay here and not stand out too much by neglecting the rules of good manners according to her bad traditions.

In Ami's case, it's practically impossible. But at least let her try.

- Yes. Sometimes we don't even know if this is a café or the Truth Department. - agreed the service lady on the other side of the window. - I think it's time we stopped fooling ourselves and other people.

- I'm Amelia. From the Kantine Temple Department of Order. You may know me as a courier. But now I have been sent on an exchange programme.

- Ah! I remember you. - The truthful secretary nodded happily. - We haven't had a chance to get acquainted because of your habit of mumbling something, almost literally throwing the clothes into the archive and hurrying away. I'm Lucille. Or just Lucy.

- My social skills are brilliant. - Ami smiled sheepishly. - Glad we finally talked.

“And you’re a nice one.”

- So. You plan to work here? - Lucy leafed through the documents businesslike. - Then... soon you'll have a great opportunity to mumble from the other side of the window. And less talkativeness is better, if you like. The fewer people in the way of your work, the better.

- Am I interrupting your work? - Amelia was embarrassed again. - Oh, I'm sorry... Or... I... What?! I don't want to believe... Please don't tell me you mean... I have to work... in this window?!

The Kantinian raised her eyebrows in disbelief.

The Omillian chuckled slightly.

- What's wrong with a window? It's a decent place for a Secretary. That's why you came here, isn't it? According to these assignment documents.

“...I never read… Because I’m here to escape the Fertility Festival… Oh my gnats… from under the scorching suns into the fire... Literally."

- Swamp and dead… Wait a moment… Let me process it… a Secretary!..

- Exactly. - Lucille confirmed, still not understanding the reason for the confusion. - And... aren't you... a Secretary?

Ami was taken aback.

She had a huge and growing desire to sit down on the floor with her bags and try to digest what she had heard.

It wouldn't hurt to take the bags off anyway. It might make things a little easier. But only a little.

She knew it would be like that! And now it was over before it had even begun.

Hello again, Ami's luck. Definitely nothing to be surprised about.

- No... I had to read clothes, but I was... in a hurry. The Chiefment didn't give me any details because... it's not nice to reveal the sins of your Department, but otherwise the blame will fall on me... In short, they've once again kicked a case that doesn't directly affect our city down the road. And frankly, I don't understand how they even remembered it...

- Because we asked them directly if they were going to take part in the programme or if they were going to put off answering forever.

- Ah. That explains a lot... So... there's an answer.

- And... it's "no"?

"It's "rotten pokers"..."

Ami snorted annoyingly.

"The Fertility Festival. No surrender, no retreat. No choice."

Blood rushed to her cheeks.

- Look… I'm... an operative. An enforcer. An escort... But by no means a secretary.

The chronically misfortuned Kantinian exhaled slowly, trying to calm herself down.

"Wait. Maybe there’s an option? Perhaps we can ask for another job? We have to try, we just have to."

Then she added with a snigger:

- You wouldn't be able to work either... My bosses just ignored the details, as usual. I’ll explain… Our Secretary won't give up his seat to anyone. He doesn't allow anyone to manage his Archives, and even seals them when he's off. "So that no mischief can be done here".

- Oh, I totally understand him! I feel the same way, sometimes I can't go into my room after a festival - there are piles of plates on the floor, adding up to work for a small cycle. Ah... Oh, my! - Lucille suddenly sounded horrified. - I'm the one who has to do the operational work now?! That would be… very weird. I'm not cut out for it. I don't really like unnecessary fuss and bustle... even avoiding the Temple's combat training in Moki's company. It's just not necessary... It's pretty quiet in Omill. That creepy, traumatising stuff will never come in handy here.

It seems that neither of them wanted to be in the other's shoes.

- Oh, don't worry. - the service woman brushed it off. - The same goes for the Kantine. There's no more serious business than someone stuck somewhere in the middle of nowhere or got in a tavern brawl. And there's a lot of Order people ready to deal with it. Some even think it's... fun.

- Fun?!

- Don't look at me. I don't find anything funny about it either.

- Oh, great. - Lucy smiled sympathetically.

- And I haven't done anything more dangerous than counting caravan sacks and inspecting trampled fields. The most exciting thing was chasing a crazy townswoman through the woods after she escaped from Temple Hospital. Everything there is boring... and boring.

- But reassuring. - exhaled the Archivist. - The crazy townswoman doesn't inspire much confidence, though...

- The others can do it. She was unarmed and only a danger to herself anyway. The most important job will be to be the judge in a dispute between a couple of pissed-off townsfolk - whose vegetables are bigger. Well, you know Kantine.

Lucy nodded happily.

- I know Kantine. I have relatives there. I used to go there on festivals when I was young. Vegetable fights a timeless Kantinian classic. And nothing has changed, as I see.

- Yes. They're stupidly true to their traditions.

The women fell into thoughtful silence for a moment.

- Well... if you refuse, then I won't have to do any of this anyway. - The Omillian looked at her interlocutor questioningly. - As I understand it, I wouldn't see my relatives. That's too bad. I miss them.

- This is the hardest decision I've ever had to make, Lucy. I really don't want to see MY relatives. At least for a while. - Ami grinned bitterly. - So we come here with our bags and head back to Cantine with them. I suspected something like this would happen... Show me the good life and quickly slam the door in my face. Not surprised, though.

- Alrighty. I gravitate towards operational work either.

- It's a really bad idea. Not talking about me losing my skills and patience here... - Ami shook her hands nervously. - With my level of Omillian... Yes, I can understand what's written much better than what's said, I can work with

documents a bit. A little. Because I can't say that I understand a lot in general. And I'm only a reader here, because as a non-witch I write on cloth and have no idea how to burn the text on the tablets like you do.

- I don't think you'll have to do much writing yourself... But you have to keep a journal. What we are doing here is more like compiling and cataloguing what someone else has already written. And here are the spines on every tablet. Read them if you're lost. Your language skills are quite good for a Kantinian, I must say... My auntie doesn't know a word in Omillian.

- And even incredibly proud of it. - Amelia added knowingly.

The secretary chuckled.

- Yes. That's why I need to know your language. It's for my own good, you know. I don't want to find myself helpless in a foreign city.

- That's a good point. I wish my people were at least half-conscious like that. But it's easier to pass off laziness or stupidity as love for the city.

- Well... they're too busy tending their fields.

- Yes. Big muscles, small brains, lots of problems to deal with because of two previous treats, no time to learn. I don't blame them for being the way they are.

- Actually, you do! - Lucy chuckled. - So... how did you learn the Omillian? And why? Did you live in Omill? Or visit your relatives here?

- If only I had a family here... I would already be your colleague. I learned the language almost by accident from books I found. Then I practised a bit during my work trips. Because I wanted to get away from my Kantine relatives. It's… a long story. There's nothing complicated about Omillian and Primish, in my opinion. The most complicated thing is to find non-agricultural books in Kantene.

- Look. Milo's back. Just in time. - Lucy pointed to the entrance.

- Alive and in one piece... Surprising. - Ami commented after a Head of the Truth Department walked by.

- Are you talking about his little fight with Finnian? Yes. I'm always amazed at how he does it, but he always does it. He's a real diplomatic genius.

Secretary waved to the Head of the Temple Complex's Truth Squad returning to his office.

As he approached, Ami noticed that the edges of this

Head's hat were slightly darkened. But it was unclear if this was happening to them now or if such incidents were commonplace for Milo and his headdress.

- Would he even bother about my problems in a state like this? - Amelia frowned.

- Of course he would. This situation is habitual for him. And an exchange is also an important matter for our Temple Chiefment. Let's go.

Amelia left her heavy bags near the Archive and followed the secretary with an inner shudder.

Lucy took the stupidly standing guest by the hand, led her to a Chief's office, made some sort of quick gesture and, after a moment of waiting, entered, dragging Amelia inside.

- Milo! - Lucy addressed him as soon as they entered. - Meet our guest. The replacement from the Kantine. Amelia. And she wants to go back already.

- Because of Finnian? - The Omillian sighed wearily. - He didn't...

- No. - the Secretary shook her head. - Because of a misunderstanding. No one had explained to Ami what she would be doing here. She's never worked in the Archives before, and she's not sure if she's up to it. And me, she says, I'm going to be an operative in Kantine! That's something I'm not ready for. Physically. I haven't even been running for an Aeon.

Luckily Lucy took on the responsibility of explaining the situation, giving Amelia some time to rest and focus… Then nodded to the boss and left the office.

Leaving the Kantinian on her own again.

- I seeeeee... - Milo sighed and scratched his hat thoughtfully after Lucille had left them. - Is it really that bad?

Milo sank down tiredly at his desk.

But he looked even relaxed now, as if this furniture could protect him from all the trouble on the Mainland... Who knows. Maybe it could.

Second most powerful artefact. After his protective hat.

"Focus."

- Are... are we talking about me? - Ami was forced to remember why she was here and why she should speak. - I'm no more physically or mentally ready for secretarial work than Lucille.

- I know you're a courier. I remember you well. It's a similar job. Soooo... Any suggestions? Coffee?

The Station Master gestured for the visitor to sit down

and begin her dismal tale. She did so, panting and struggling to find the right words, to pull them out, to find them among the scattered fragments of thought in her head.

- Thanks... - Ami shook her head negatively, remembering the diuretic properties of the insidious green beverage. - Later.

She was already stressed out, it seemed she would soon have this problem in a natural way. She was about to panic.

The world was already full of surprises, and one more would surely be unnecessary.

- And they're not similar. I'm... an operative. An enforcer. An escort... And this... This is different! It's about moving around a lot and being a bit of an adrenaline junkie. You see? I'm... not cut out to be a secretary. I definitely... won't survive sitting down. Or your Station won't...

Her cheeks blushed even more than before, which made her more embarrassed and blushed even more... This cycle never ends.

Amelia made a mad, desperate gesture.

- …It's so dumb! I mean... It's... Gee! Why does anyone need a foreign Secretary?! So stupid...

She paused, realising that she had just called the leaders of all the Mainland's Temples "stupid".

- Idea's not mine. - peacefully reminded Milo, listened attentively to the confused explanation. - Ask Sandra and others. But I guess that's the point. The Kantinian Secretary has to work with all documents without problems and misunderstandings. We expected your leaders to send someone who knew Omillian. Our Secretary knows Kantinian. If your professions were compatible, it could work.

- I'll tell you something about the viability of the idea in general... You're very lucky to be talking to the Kantinian, you know? And we're talking about my Homelands now, where people are super focused on their fertility and their crops. Sometimes I even think we're speaking different languages. And if you speak in non-Kantinian not about crops… you're just making meaningless, inarticulate sounds to them. That's all.

After her irritated tirade, she paused to catch her breath and find her next words.

Milo listened attentively and did not interrupt.

- So... - the Kantinian continued. - Back to our current case. Yes. We're talking. But my level of knowledge isn't sufficient to work with documents. Or people. I... can

understand Omillian. I can read and even write a little. But I can't burn anything on the tablets, that's for sure. I'm not a witch.

Milo nodded thoughtfully.

- Hmm... What can I say? We expected a non-witch to come. We wanted to see if the non-wizards could adapt to working here with us. We assumed also that a witch working side by side with others in the Department of Order would show them we're not hostile or scary and make them change their mind about us and our cooperation. "To improve mutual understanding, to facilitate the exchange of experience and documentation," were the stated aims. I can add that we need to work together to at least be more effective.

- Don't send Finnian. - Ami chuckled. - I'm not sure about the hostility... but he's frightening.

Milo winced.

- He's not the most cooperative witch on the Mainland. And... the Temples need him, like it or not.

"He clearly doesn't like him. However, he has every reason to do so."

- I… don't know him personally. Though, send him. Lucy is too nice for our Lands, I'd feel sorry for her. The Kantian Order Department isn't about cooperation either, and it's much easier to burn them than to deal with them. As for cooperation... There could be no "mutual understanding" without "mutual interests" and "benefits". Omillians and Kantinians have no common interests. On the contrary. No aliens - there are no people to be friends against. They really like to be "special" and "insulted". Their ground low self-esteem has barely found that excuse, and they can't afford the luxury of giving up their illusion of superiority. Well, Finnian or not, they wouldn't cooperate with foreigners... at least not on a voluntary basis. Co-operation requires a developed mind and normal self-esteem; one tries to understand the others, not to disregard them or to belittle them for imaginary invented shortcomings. Such an ability is not available in our cruel Lands, because the harder life is, the less resources our brain give to secondary things like observation and research. Kantinian life isn't so hard in the last great cycles, but I have the feeling that they deliberately make it harder for themselves so that they don't learn. What was I saying... lose that hope once and for all. It's a hopeless case. They wouldn't grow enough to cooperate in the near Aeon. Hire me as a consultant and expert on Kantine. You'll save a lot of time and

effort.

Amelia snorted cheerfully.

Talking about abstract categories, which was her favourite pastime, made her feel a little more at ease.

Milo looked a little embarrassed to hear so many words from someone who was usually so quiet, almost a deaf-mute.

But he didn't look annoyed. That's a good sign. At least he's patient. A rare virtue. Lucy was right about him.

- Well... I see. At least... We still were hoping for some progress... With the other cities on the Mainland.

The Station Chief fell silent in thought.

- It's definitely worth trying with others. Kantine as hopeless as my own situation as its part. - Amelia signed. - Somehow I knew it would be a short trip. I hadn't even packed much. I knew I'd be on my way back soon. Not because I didn't want to stay here, I was ready to leave Kantine even for a short time. I just knew something would go wrong… For some reason.

She nodded to herself, staring thoughtfully through the wall into the distance. Ami was so engrossed in her favourite subject that she forgot her shyness and despair.

- But why are you here then? - Milo furrowed his brow. - Why did you even agree? Omillian bloodlines?

- Not sure about my bloodlines… - the service woman confoundedly rubbed her chin. - But I'm here because of my family, yes. I wanted to be as far as possible from them for as long as possible. And… I suppose my interest for the other cities and foreign languages has the same source.

- Oh… - Milo's eyebrows were both raised in surprise now.

- Yesss… - Amelia exhaled. - That's why one can call my situation hopeless. Do you… have another vacancy?

- I'm afraid, no. Our staff is small and fully staffed, so to say.

Ami sighed heavily.

- Is it really so hopeless? - Station's Chief asked sympathetically. - The Continent is big. You are young. There's a lot of cities. Why not Prime? Or Zeth. We're not talking about Lim, they don't have a clearly dedicated force to maintain order, as far as I know, because they just don't run amok.

Ami made a sharp, angry gesture full of annoyance.

- I've tried! Tried a lot, tried this, tried that, tried banging my head against the city's bureaucracy and

immigration policy… I've got nothing and nothing. - Amelia frowned bitterly. - Oh, not absolutely nothing, silly me... I've got depression and fatigue. You forget I'm not a witch. And this Continent is no place for someone like me. Unless you don't want to live in Kantine. And I really don't want to… Prime doesn't want me... Lim is too far. And there were no business trips there. It's easier to go to Youlle and settle there, but they won't let me in either... At least my mother didn't succeed there.

- Your mother has been to Youlle ?

- Yes and no... I know she went there once, I know she didn't reach the city, I know it's an embittered ghoul now living in our house. That's all I know. Everything in between is gossip.

- Didn't she tell you?

- No. We don't talk for many cycles. If we don't call incoming orders a conversation. I can have that type of conversation at work. In a more respectful way.

- Is your mother also a militia?

- No. She's just malicious… Sorry. She was an explorer and a cartographer. I only learnt that from the notes. When I was younger, I used to hide in the shed from my family. That's when I found her travel notes. I got in a lot of trouble for it, but it was worth it. It changed my whole life. As I said, my family is a real inspiration to learn new languages in the hope of hearing something more pleasant in a foreign language. And to become a vagabond, to see if the whole Mainland is populated by swamp ghouls.

- And. What are the conclusions?

- Not sure yet... I've met some nice people here and in Prime. And the good thing is that I know a bit of every language now. Nothing at a decent level, but still better than most of the Kantine people. Better than nothing.

- Depending on the level of ambition, this branch will grow with the tree, and the height will never seem sufficient, you know. - The Truthful Chief remarked sternly. - And what about your Secretary? Should he know at least a couple of languages at an average level, enough to get the job done?

- Our Secretary does indeed know a few languages. At a very mediocre level. He has a full-time translator. Who knows enough to get the job done. And neither of them would move anywhere, I'm sure. They have grown into their precious fields.

- I see...

Having lost his last hope for a successful solution to the problem, the Station Chief looked lost in thought.

- So. What now? - the Kantinian interrupted his thoughts impatiently, scratching her wrist nervously.

- I... really don't know. - Milo shifted his sad gaze to the window. - With Prime, we've had a little delay in fulfilling the agreement. They have several secretaries, but they can't spare any right now. That's understandable.

Times are hard for them, especially these cycles. We also can't afford the internal chaos of changing secretaries, the need for training and explanations now will only take away our remaining resources and lead to more destabilisation... As I said, we have a small staff, with just enough work for the people we have. Everyone has their own responsibilities, everything is in place and working... I would rely on Zeth, but I guess if we don't get a reasonable answer from here, the programme will be postponed indefinitely until things get better in Prime... Or shut down the entire project... Sadly. Sandra will be really unhappy about this.

The thought obviously made him nervous.

He stood up and walked around the office, taking wide strides as if trying to escape from disturbing thoughts, and returned to his seat.

- A funny thing... is that the Kantinians fulfilled their part of the contract. - he said with a slight, slightly strained smile.

- And as always, they did it crookedly. - Amelia scoffed.

- They shared an employee at least. It means something.

- Not a very valuable one, though. You know Kantinians, they're very practical people, and they wouldn't give away anything of value. Those who knew about fertility cycles and types and varieties of vegetables stayed home.

- Good thing local values are different.

- Best thing ever. And it's a shame I have to go back...

The service woman, distracted by the conversation , was overcome by heavy sad thoughts again.

- Well, unless you're willing to try... - Milo, not refusing the chance to somehow solve their common problem, narrowed his eyes slightly. - We can help each other. You don't want to go home. I don't want to bring bad news back to my superiors... They have waited long enough for this programme to start. And they want the results... But of course you can rest in town for now, even if you refuse, and I'll ask

the Chief for a place for you to stay. You need to rest. And we'll wait for someone else.

“Oh my ghouls!..”

The service woman exhaled painfully, clutching one hand with the other in a nervous gesture.

Housing in Omill was an incredibly great thing, you know. Even if it's only temporary. Definitely more than nothing and worth coming all the way to Omill. It's a way of celebrating their failure, but away from home, with chic.

This “someone else” sounds paralysing and almost physically painful. Someone more lucky, more capable, and “normal” enough to work with boring documents without a steady wish to tear them apart or smash to the wall almost immediately...

She's sooo jealous.

Oopsie. She bit her gums.

"Whatever. Amelia. Please. Fail again. Disgrace yourself. Die here... But there's no coming back. And no “someone else”. They don't deserve it. They shouldn't take our place here. There’s no people on the whole Mainland who wants to be there more than we do."

Acknowledged. No coming back. Right.

- Yessss... - Amelia hissed and sighed heavily again. - There's no going back... I'm in.

Her voice was heavy and muffled. The air in here seems to be getting heavier because of her growing black inner emptiness. The office began to blur into coloured blobs, but then all her attention was focused on the source of the sound, which was Milo.

- Are you... sure?

- …Yessss. I'm not at all ready for secretarial work... But I'm even less ready to go home now. It's a mockery of my fate what happened, but I'll take it.

I'm afraid I won't be an employee of the cycle, but if I accept the appointment, I'll do my best.

She shook her head irritably.

- We're also willing to put in some effort and give you time to adjust. If you're not doing well, we'll ask Lucy to come back. I think the Station can handle a few lights of paperwork downtime. At least we are trying. It's worth it, I think... The old Mainland-wide project deserves it.

The Truth Station Chief's voice betrayed relief. Apparently his boss, Sandra, was a tough woman.

For a moment, a visceral silence hovered in the office.

"Well done, Amelia. Maybe it’s the beginning of something good outside of the home city.”

And maybe it's the beginning of the end... the beginning of the biggest disgrace of our lives... Or our death from being crushed and suffocated by these boring duties... Or the beginning of nothing, if we're lucky.

“Anyway it’s out Kantine”.

Definitely...

- Thank you... - Amelia murmured, the full weight of the decision continued to sink in. - I'll get instructions from Lucille right away.

The blood that had long coloured her cheeks began to throb loudly in her ears and pulsate in her temples.

- Do it. Good luck then... And later, if I'm not buried by all this urgent tablet work... which has now increased, I'll fill you in on some of the latest cases and introduce you to our people... But right now I've got a full table of things to do.

Milo sounded exhausted, and a pile on his desk was really impressive.

- Yeah, right… Thanks for your time. And tell me... - Ami stared at her potential boss with a questioning look, feeling a respectful mistrust. - How did that vile witch not burn you? Even the documents in my hands were damaged.

- It’s easy. I didn't allow a reaction or even the thought of one. There was no fear or retaliatory anger in me. I was whole. - He drew a ball in the air with his hands as an explanation. - The fire found nothing to hold onto and couldn't get close. In general, the witch's kind of fire is useful because it burns out what's unnecessary.

- Unnecessary non-witch people? And their papers? - Ami asked, a little confused.

- Scared non-witch people with papers. - Milo confirmed.

- But how?! Well. Alrighty. Thanks again...

Although his explanation meant nothing to Amelia, she decided not to start her career by pissing off her boss and simply left the office.

There is no guarantee she won’t piss him off later. In fact, with her temper, there is a guarantee that it will inevitably happen. And more than once.

…What a mess…

…What a clutterflip…

...I just can't believe it. It's mind-boggling…

She... herself... had just agreed to do the ever-hated

paperwork! Practically plunged herself into a quagmire without any help from the side!

If someone had told her this before, she would have laughed. Maybe more than that. Possibly she'd have added a few more harsh words.

Her destiny is good at using sucker punches. For purely pedagogical purposes, of course... but who, pray tell, has come out the better for it.

Ami sighed, picked herself up from the floor, and obediently crept back to the Archivist.

This strange light should be accompanied by strange actions. Trying to learn the basics of the secretarial profession was a semi-functional plan.

The Kantinian stomped a little near the entrance to the realm of the tablets.

She tapped the wall near the entrance with the knuckles of her fist as a Kantinian habit, but immediately rubbed her hand and winced in pain. She had forgotten that she should have been warned about her appearance in Omill... Here we go again.

Luckily for her, while she was standing there, Lucille looked out of the window, noticing movement outside.

- Ah! Come in! - She waved.

Ami obediently made her way into the small room, most of which was taken up by huge shelves containing countless reports, case files and other undoubtedly important documents...

...an overwhelmingly huge amount of information.

Ami is so... small by comparison!

Trying to assess the size of the gigantic filing cabinet and the amount of knowledge it contained, Ami suddenly felt dizzy and sank heavily into the chair Lucy had carefully placed beside her.

The Secretary herself sat down on the top of her desk, shifting the work plates slightly to the side.

- How... How do you get something from the top? - The new Archivist asked in amazement.

- Information from above is rarely used. You can get it from the second level... if you need it. Milo will give you the access gesture to the Upper Vault. - replied the experienced one. - Provided you stay here, of course. You are, aren't you?

Lucy looked at Ami questioningly.

- Yesss… - the Kantinian hissed habitually.

- Good. The Masters have been talking about the

importance of this programme for so long that I almost believe it myself.

- Give me a good scare with a message that I need to know what this wall of reports is all about and where everything is, and you'll see me running back to Kantine, terrified and screaming.

- Actually... you do need to know. There's a complex system of cataloguing here. Documents are categorised by activity, by chronology, by geography, by authorship - by the personalities who created them, by the subject to which they relate, by subject, by type of document... - began the secretary cautiously, seeing Amelia's widened eyes. - But wait with horror and screams! As you won't be here for long, you don't need to know everything... Just remember that there are recent cases at the bottom. You'll usually be asked about them. Near the door are reports, in the middle are incidents, by the window is correspondence and the third party documents.

- Only the lower ones... - Ami echoed sceptically, feeling a lump of approaching fear in her throat.

She looked at the seemingly endless shelves and swallowed again.

- Yes, - Lucille cleared her throat and continued. - From time to time, there will be visitors to Milo's and Moki's offices. Don't worry about them, just show them the way to the right office if they hesitate. And you will meet couriers like yourself.

- And envy them.

- You chose the side.

- The darkside… Right.

Lucy thought for a moment. Then she shook her head and continued.

- I don't think I have anything to add at the moment. You see... Nothing is scary here, especially once you get used to it. You can ask me if you have any doubts, I'll leave you my address. It's all so sudden, even if you consider that I've had my travel bag ready for a while. Ever since Prime approved the exchange programme. I'll still have to pack and check everything, but not in your stressful way. I have nothing to run from or to. I'll wait for the caravan to Kantene, because I hate walking and I like to see my luggage not on my back.

- Lucky you. My walk, expected to be joyful, turned into suffering due to a chafed shoulder.

- Sad case.

- Yes. But not so sad compared to participating in a local festival.

- Alrighty then… - the acting Secretary frowned in concentration. - Don't be scared. You'll mostly be asked the same questions. And not so often now. Practically the whole team is working on these weird cases.

- Wow! - Amelia perked up, temporarily forgetting her troubles. - How weird? Really, really weird-weird? Or just... weird?

- Really, really weird... Even the VST agents were involved. - Lucy confirmed it. - You can read it yourself, by the way. If you're interested in such things, this job might not be so boring for you.

- I wish I could be there! I hoped... it doesn't matter what I hoped. Pray continue.

- Alrighty. Well, anyway... You'll see Kyle here soon, when he's back from Prime, rested and with more information on the case. We're lucky to have him and not one of those arrogant VST nerds who interact with local life forms strictly according to protocol. He's as nice and simple as all great souls are. And when it comes to the amount of coffee he drinks with us, he's one of us. And we are happy and proud of it.

- A real VST agent! How sad he’s not here, I never saw one! I heard one of them worked in Kantine, but it was before I joined the service. Unfortunately.

- Be patient. You’ll see him. You’ll see the cases… - Lucy made a wide sweep, covering the infinity of shelves, which was perceived as such in contrast to the modest size of the room itself. - And that everything isn’t so bad.

- What are the cases? In brief? - Amelia shifted impatiently in her chair.

- If not to go into details... memory loss and... people loss. Amnesias. Disappearances. Deaths... In amounts that Omill… no, even the Mainland had ever seen before.

Lucy looked confused, she shook her head sadly.

An uncomfortable chill ran down the back of Amelia's neck. She shivered.

- It's… no fun.

- Truly no.

The women were silent for a moment. Both had the feeling that in the already dark Archive closet, the darkness of unsolved cases was thickening, moving from the tablets into their souls with a disturbing sticky eeriness.

- As I said, there are similar cases in our city.

- Maybe that's why the Temples Masters want this integration so badly… Anyone knows we can't solve it alone. - the Omillian Archivist thoughtfully assumed.

- Quite right. But I must warn you - Kantene keeps these cases under wraps. Our Temple Department, as always, is confidently planning to handle everything on their own and take all the credit...

Lucy snorted disapprovingly.

- ...but all they will get, as usual, is a dressing down from the Administration, who will traditionally pretend that they had nothing to do with it and were unaware of it all along. - Amelia continued.

Lucille smiled mockingly.

- Stupid intrigues in the face of a true jeopardy.

- Yes. I tried to examine one document. But it disappeared soon. I think our Secretary helped it.

- Was it... about the disappearance of a VST agent?

- No... I think... no... it was something about people and instruments... VST agent disappeared too?! Oh no! How?! Why... why is there no investigation, no official search?! You know... now I'm really pissed off. I have always admired the few stories about VST agents that I have come across in my professional life. I've always wanted to do something to help them. Even though I knew that their skills and influence were much greater than mine. Good news for me here, as I see, you have full access to information, unlike the Archives of my home Department?

- I wish I knew less. - the Secretary threw up her hands.

- Good good… you will know much less in Kantine, I assure you, curiocity isn't much favored here… So. If I'm a Secretary now… then all the secrets are mine! And it finally makes sense, you know... And now we're talking.

- Help yourself. - Lucy smiled as Amelia's sudden enthusiasm quickly replaced the utter despondency that had preceded it. - But please, keep everything in order.

- I will!

The confused Ami was no longer there. Sitting on the chair was the embodiment of the concentrated curiosity she had always been.

- You shouldn't disrespect archiving itself. You are the memory of the entire Temples Complex. It's a difficult task and an honourable position. Knowledge should be treated with respect. Try leaving the Station for a couple of lights

without the Archives, and you'll see true chaos. No one can do anything without the proper information. Information is the key to everything.

Kantinian service woman smiled faintly.

- I agree. I love the Primean approach to knowledge and I respect the written word. I'm an omnivore when it comes to information. And thanks for trying to cheer me up.

- You were so upset! - Lucy shook her head in sympathy.

- Everyone will if they have to go to Kantene… Why… why you're not upset, by the way? Things aren't going so well for you either! I almost feel guilty.

Lucille shrugged slightly.

- I'll be glad to see my relatives, as I said. I love the air, the food, and the landscapes of Kantine. So quiet and peaceful. Maybe I'll be unhappy later. Who knows.

- I hope you'll never be there long enough to get as sick of these landscapes as I am... It's eerily quiet and peaceful there, yeah. Like a swamp full of sleeping ghouls.

- Well... what can I say? The Omillians say: "If you're born in Omill - you're already a winner".

- Agreed. - Amelia sighed enviously.

The Secretary rose from her desk and made an inviting gesture.

- I invite you into a winner's circle. Time to get acquainted with the most interesting side of the functioning of our Station, which is the biggest part of our job. And time to meet the most desperate, incurable caffeine addicts, the Omill's first biscuit eaters! They're about to have their traditional junket. Shall we?

She's great at making lovely Festival announcements, isn't she? If Lucy had a word at their Fertility Festival, or at least introduced the speakers, maybe things wouldn't have looked so hopeless in those lights.

They left the Archive and Lucy sealed the entrance with the usual witchy motion.

...How will Ami do it herself? It's not clear yet.

Probably - she won't be able to. It is an impossible task for a non-witch. Just another in a series of impossible tasks in her new position.

But... Milo is fine with it, and Ami has just found a purpose in this confusing part of her pointless life.

- Ami, this is Donny... - Lucy introduced the thoughtful Kantinian to the service man who was hurrying to the coffee

table. - Ami... will be filling in for me.

The stocky, tanned Omillian smiled broadly.

- A new competitor for the sunrise coffee and pastries!

- I'm not much of a competitor, I guess. I'll be desperately shy for a while, like a moment. Then I'll be gone. And then Lucy will be back. That's all.

A sleepy-looking officer crawled out of the cell under the stairs.

She blinked her big yellow irises, trying to focus on the couple standing before her. But it was as if the woman was looking through them, not at them.

- Laivy! You're up early. - Lucy greeted the sleeper carelessly. - Did the smell of coffee disturb you?

The one called Laivy made an indeterminate growl that could be interpreted as agreement, greeting or curse, and followed Donny to the coffee table.

- Laivy's the nightwatchwoman… - Lucy explained in a low voice. - All light she sleeps, all dark time she watches. An invaluable worker. And the target of endless jokes all the time when she’s not hearing. And when she does hear it.

- Does she always react with that sound?

- No. Sometimes she also reacts like this. - Lucy raised her eyes and blew air noisily through her lips.

The officers turned at the sound, and the Secretary smiled sweetly.

Smiling back, they decided that fresh coffee was more interesting than the details of what was going on. The aroma of the drink, warmed by the witch's warmth in the palms of their hands, was already wafting through the Truth Station, luring the others out of their offices.

- We have some of the best coffee in the city here. - Lucille announced proudly. - I don't know where Milo dug up those seedlings he planted in our yard, but the raw material is great... Now, about brewing it here according to our family recipes. Like I said, it's time to stop lying to people and admit we're a coffee shop. Change the sign. Forget about these weird cases.

- "Coffee Station" or "Truth Coffeehouse"?

- We haven't decided yet... That's why the sign stays the same. The second thing that might be an obstacle is that we don't make our own biscuit makers here. But that can be fixed.

- Where do you get the sweets? - Ami asked with real interest.

She could use a sweet treat for her stress right now.

- Usually someone brought them from their favourite coffee shop. Or from home. When they take the trouble to make something according to their mood and their family recipes, it's always a real celebration!

- The only kind of celebration I like. When the mood makes you celebrate, not the schedule.

Lucille nodded.

- True Omillian approach. Moki! Milo was looking for you. Moki, wait! This is Ami. From now on, if you want to ask me a question, ask Ami.

Lucy deftly managed to intercept a dark-skinned young officer as he tried to fly past. This man was graceful, and handsome but somewhat aloof, like almost all native Selvas. And unlike most Selvas, he was scowling.

- Aha... - he muttered absent-mindedly, as if the archivist had only slowed his body and his thoughts had travelled in another direction.

Moki cast an absent-minded glance at them, then at the office door on this level, apparently realising that he needed to reconnect with his thoughts, then flew away.

- Let's go to the coffee pot before the swallows blow everything out and eat all the biscuits. - Lucy suggested. - I'll introduce you to the others later... Or Milo will.

- I like your priorities. - Ami grinned.

- I don't work here for the first light. Coffee first, then everything else. It's an old Omillian law. Even if you don't get to know everyone who works here, they'll get to you sooner or later. The people's path to the Archive won't be overgrown.

- Sounds like a threat. - Amelia shivered. - I'm not used to working with a lot of people at the same time every light ... In fact, I always escaped it. As well as escaping the cloth work, I prefer natural workplaces — wide roads, high Mountains, deep Forests. And now... I think I need to learn some new things about myself. To add to my mental dossier. It's not easy, but it's necessary. For growth.

- Yes, it is. Growth is a step into the unknown... Don't get too discouraged. Once you get used to the amount of routine, there's a perverse pleasure to be found in organising information and sorting out threads.

Ami chuckled.

- You weren’t born with it either, right?

- I wasn't... Oh hey! You almost drank it all! I left my cup in the office... Where's yours? Hurry up.

Amelia jumped up eagerly.

- It's in my hiking bag! I'll be right back in a moment...

- Let's go!

They ran to their cups as if nothing else mattered, to fetch a favourite mug and pour into it the coveted green drink whose aroma had been teasing their olfactory receptors for quite some time.

Lucky Lucy had it as a matter of course every light. And Ami really missed Omill's coffee. And Prime's cakes... Like she would never be able to miss anyone in the world.

Pulling out her favourite lightweight travel mug, made from half a large walnut shell, the Kantinian slyboots quickly found herself and the Secretary near the coffee table.

Lucy's mug immediately absorbed Amelia's full attention.

Typical Omillian stoneware, with the traditional pattern and the handy finger indentations, and the glazed distinctive green rim that indicated the amount of coffee the owner had drunk.

The Kantinian looked around at the other cups, fascinated.

She remembered someone's story about a Selva cup made of glazed dried mushrooms. These cups are rare, but it's said that the coffee in them has a unique flavour... Is one of these cups like that? What materials are they made of?

The Kantinian temporarily forgot to be shy and stared shamelessly at each cup. This could be interpreted as some kind of adaptation.

- Well. Now you're really one of us. We share the same coffee. - Lucy smiled.

- Not quite the same, I'm not a witch... - Ami sighed, grumbling. - I've been suffering from it my whole swamp life... And my punishment here is cold coffee to start with.

At the same moment, her own cup was suddenly in the big hands of the tall blonde witch. But instead of protesting, the Kantinian was surprised.

Wow. But instead of protesting, the Kantinian was stunned.

- Let me help you. - the giant announced after the fact.

- Emm. Thanks... - Ami mumbled.

It was so sudden.

- ...Elsu. - Lucy helped.

- Thank you... Elsu. - Amelia echoed.

"You’re sooo huuuuge..."

Given the size and muscle density of her benefactress, politeness was the best strategy.

Ami painfully tried to remember all the names she had just heard. But it was impossible not to remember Elsu.

She stood out from the crowd with her far from average Omillian height, her prominent musculature and her blonde hair, which reminded Amelia of the patchwork cultures of her hometown. This woman was definitely of Nordic descent.

- I've never heated coffee in a cup like this before... - a giant gently turned the cup in her hands, examined it and handed it back to its owner. - Try it. Is it warm enough?

Ami took a careful sip and squinted with pleasure.

- It's... just wonderful. Thank you again.

The Omillian smiled contentedly in return.

...Once the coffee socialising was over, Ami and Lucy went back to the Archive and moved on to the more mundane part.

- Your bag is here. - the archivist noticed as she watched the Kantinian put her mug back in her travel bag. - Which means... The Chiefdom hasn't assigned you a place to stay yet. I'll have to remind Milo of that. Because the only decent place to sleep in this Station is Laivy's.

- Why does Laivy live here? Doesn't she have a home?

- She does. She goes there on festivals.

- And that's it?

- That's it.

- That's interesting. Why doesn't she live in her own house?

- I don't know. - Lucy shook her head. - Nobody knows.

- I see... You know... I feel like I can conquer the Mainland now, and I don't care where I sleep or if I will ever sleep in this cycle. I'm more than ready for all the doom, agony and indelible shame to come... I had soothing doping. Just what I needed the last few cycles.

- You will soon care when the coffee wears off and the rollback begins... Don't let the coffee trick you and don't be so self-assured to neglect the rest and your mental health. Otherwise, you'll be burnt out before you even start.

- Thank you, my guardian spirit! - Amelia bowed playfully.

- Don't be sarcastic. The best strategy is to rest and distract yourself now.

- I'm not! And I totally agree. There was not enough

pastry to eat my stress away. Do you have an idea where I can get some more?

- At Anfey's. The pastry here is fantastic. They also have a lovely floral ale. The coffee is excellent too. You know... I would run there to get something tasty for dinner. And to show you where it is, because it is on the way to our service houses. Getting drinks and snacks here is the best way to celebrate your arrival and my departure.

- I'm in! - Ami immediately agreed. - Thank you for the fuss.

- It's part of my job. - Lucy waved it off. - To help people. To get coffee and pastries... To torture the boss by reminding him of his endless tasks. Wait for me then. I'll go to Milo's office and return. Then we go.

Light 6. Sunset. A cozy get-together .

They walked through the city, and at first Ami tried to remember the way. But after the third or fourth turn, she realised... that all the Omill kotties are different, all the alleys are equally beautiful, and it will not work to remember anything, and all that remains is to relax and enjoy the evening walk.

All she saw was a blue landmark mushroom. Well, that's more than nothing. And it's beautiful.

The evening was simply breathtaking.

Every evening in Omill was good for Ami almost by default, but here the weather was trying to be kind to her. It was warm, still, and the stars were beginning to appear like small, distant lamps in the cloudless purple sky.

The softly darkened city was beautifully illuminated.

Closer sources of light were the gradually activating glowing mushrooms in jars, tamed by the locals, that lit the streets and paths near the houses.

The Kantinian, gazing at all these witchy, wonderful colours and beautiful things, almost bumped into Lucy, who had stopped at her planned destination.

- I'll get something to eat and drink and go home. - Lucille reported briefly.

- Alrighty. I'm going to stay here for a while. I'm not sure what I want to do, but I'm just going to sit here for a bit and rest. So tired, so post-adrenaline.

- Oh, poor thing. Don't worry about it. You'll be home

soon.

Lucy went into the round earthen building of the café. The Kantinian found a comfortable seat, exhaled and looked around with renewed interest. Everything here pleased her with its novelty and difference from what had irritated her eyes in her hometown. Everything here was fantastic. And weirdly strange.

There could be several in a single spot, in the shadow of this majestic landmark mushroom, shimmering charmingly at sunset. How did they manage to survive without competition? Another urban mystery.

In Kantine, the tavern owners divided up the districts. City dwellers who had worked hard all lights were usually reluctant to walk down the next street and face potentially unpleasant surprises, preferring the nearest tavern with its familiar faces and dishes.

The lucky ones, whose family had a cooking person in the house, had the opportunity to come home, eat and rest. It was a kind of luxury. Home-cooked food was prized above all else. And these people had a great choice, whether they wanted to have a snack and socialise in the evening, or if they were too tired and just wanted to go home, eat and go to bed.

Lucy happily left the café with her treats and returned to a pensive Ami.

- I think I have to show you... - she started.

- Oh dear! - The Kantinian interrupted enthusiastically. - Sorry! I have to ask. What is that delicious smelling thing you have there?! I've never tasted anything like it!

- Then you definitely should, believe the local woman. - Lucy smiled. - It's the unique flavour of the spiced coffee from this place. That's why we're here. It's addictive in a way that makes it impossible to pass it by. Anfey's family recipe.

- I really want it. - the alien nodded approvingly. - It's the only thing that can make me forget my tiredness and uncertainty.

The Omillian gestured to the entrance of the small café.

- Ask for a "Lights of the North".

- Understood. So. You were going to tell me where my kotti was?

Lucy pointed in a direction.

- Right. It's there. Count five kotties forward, three left, then turn right and it will be at the end of the alley.

- Thank you for everything! - the Kantinian service woman saluted gratefully. - I owe you.

The Omillian chuckled approvingly, stamping her feet in uncertainty, looking appraisingly at her acquisitions and turning her thoughtful gaze into the distance to the darkening hills on the outskirts of the city, behind which the daylight had recently set.

- On second thought... You know, I wanted to go home, but the evening is so good. I'll just wait for you there with your bags.

- Great. It’s so nice of you! I'll be right back.

- Take your time. I'm in no hurry. The weather is great.

- Fine.

...curiously, Kantinian entered the cosy café and placed her order, adding a few delicious floral sweets to the original plan.

It was omillishly cosy inside, the walls decorated with traditional murals, the main theme of which was... woods and coffee of course. Leaves, branches, beans... Everything was either ornamental or gracefully interwoven. Lovely.

The shapes of the windows in this city are remarkable, but these were really unusual, even by local standards. Not round or oval, but two wide bands running the whole length of the walls... a semi-transparent wall. How... do they do that?

Ami had some basic information, but she had never come across any books on Omill's architecture. She will have to ask someone.

The Kantinian took out a bag of seeds and dried Loopie berries, which don't grow in these parts of the Mainland, and looked at the hostess questioningly.

Will this do as payment?

Anfey nodded in the affirmative, accepted the payment and, after a curious glance at a Kantinian nutshell cup she had received. She put the required treats into a quaint embroidered cloth shopping bag that Ami had bought on her last visit to the city.

Another beautiful and practical feature of Omillian dessert-eating culture.

Satisfied client looked into the wonderful bag and impatiently pulled out a deliciously smelling sweet and began to chew.

Totally breathtaking.

How do they make them so crispy and airy? Ami wasn't the best botanist, but she knew they were grains, and she also knew that grains couldn't have a texture like that!

The hostess handed her the coffee cocktail with a nice

smile.

Ami added a few more long, shiny seeds to the ones she had already given. She was impressed. Lucy was right about this place. It's great that it's so close to Ami's proposed quartering place.

Anfey stared curiously at the seeds. It was obvious that she was seeing them for the first time. These were some of Ami's favourites.

They weren't particularly valuable by Kantine standards, Amelia didn't understand why — personally, she would only pay with them. And would gladly accept them in return.

Beautiful specimens, with pot-bellied bodies and large blue-yellow leaves. Yes, the yield of the edible part was low, but they were so delicious... Especially when dried.

- The leaves are not eaten, the stem is kept throughout the cold season, and when dried it is second to none. - The Kantinian explained without waiting for a question. - Very tasty, useful and practical.

If she ever managed to move here, these vegetables would be the first thing she would bring with her.

Anfey's looked a bit intrigued. It was unclear whether it was the sight of the interesting seeds or Ami's enthusiasm for them that impressed her more, but the main thing was that it was a win-win situation. Both sides were happy with the deal

With a satisfied smile on her face and treats in her hands, the Kantinian lazily made her way out of this wonderful little city of uplifting aromas, unbelievably colourful drinks and an astonishing variety of snacks.

She had found true peace and happiness, if only for a moment. These “remedies” can cure any malaise and fatigue.

It would be great to see how much of an effect all this would have on Ami in half a cycle. And can it compensate for all the worries this city has in store for her?

And when we return to Omill after a cycle, perhaps we will see our plants taking root in the Anfey's garden. They would be immediately noticeable.

That would be nice. At least her lovely favourite plants will be living in this beautiful place.

Ami returned to Lucy, who was comfortably settled under the blue landmark mushroom and had already started the mini-banquet.

Still smiling broadly at the smell of the things she had brought, the Kantinian sat down next to him with a small,

admiring sigh. She began to place her incredible treasures on the rough clay surface of the table.

Once again, she delightedly breathed in the fresh city air, filled with the smells of delicious food, the nearby forest and lake, the damp clay of the table and the sprinkled paths, the slightly woody scent of the mushroom, and a host of other delightful nuances. Amelia realised that she was also looking closely at Lucy's cup, which had caught her eye back at the Station.

It seemed that Ami wasn't the only one who carried her favourite cosy mug from home to work and from work to travel. Lucy did the same. And apparently all the Ommilians did too. The beverages are tastier in tamed vessels.

So Amelia was right on trend. Her typical Kantine mug, however, stood out as much from the Omill mugs as the most outlandish and unusual local ones. Mugs were a matter of pride, and standing out with a mug was a good old local tradition.

And as the Kantinian promised her favourite cup, they sat under an Omill mushroom, ready to taste something absolutely incredible together.

Whatever came next in their lives didn't matter now, for the world faded away in an instant as she sipped at a drink with a completely mesmerising smell and colour.

- Witchyyyyy! I'll never get used to how wonderful the local drinks are! Now I understand why you have to go out for coffee even if you work at Temples Station... Not to mention the irreplaceable pleasure of sitting under those beautiful mushrooms, this drink is incredibly complex, isn't it? Especially for a non-witch.

- Yes, the coffee berries grow on bushes all over the city. Go out, pick them, infuse them... But I would never recreate this cocktail at home. Even being an average witch and a good cook. I still don't know what Anfey does with coffee, and of course she won't tell me. She'll just smile. I can recognise and smell a lot of things here. But I've never been able to replicate this flavour at home. Milo has his own recipe. But he likes mine better. I like Tokala's method. Everyone has their own recipe.

- And I do not understand how several cafés in the same place do not go bankrupt?

- Every coffee you make is different. The Omillian tradition says “you can’t have the same coffee twice”. It's true. Each cup, like each moment in life, is the result of many

factors. The coffee maker. Her mood. The recipe. Coffee berries. Other ingredients. Seasonal differences.

Water... It's an endless list. And tasters perceive it differently at different moments in their lives. Nothing is the same. If you don't like it one light, you might like it the next. One light you want coffee with nuts, the next with flowers and herbs. With different biscuits.

- The craft of witch cooking.

- I love Kantinian cooking too, and I know that you can do amazing things without being a witch. Are you good at cooking?

Ami shook her head negatively.

- I can't cook at all. I usually steal something from the kitchen because I get home late and don't feel like eating with the family. Maybe I'll have to learn to cook here because there's nothing to steal, but I hope my salary will be enough to keep me a lazy, happy eater.

- Our salary won't disappoint you, believe me. But there's one change I must make. I have seen the size of the portions in the Kantine taverns. It's... well, it's huge! You humans really do eat a lot.

- It's true. But that's the way it is in our mainland food capital. We work a lot, we eat a lot.

- Quite right... Well, that's what I was going to say. If you have an average appetite, you'll be fine.

- Average by Kantinian standards, yes.

- So… this bag of biscuits. How long will it last? Two or three lights maybe?

- This evening.

- Evening! Oh, my... My advice then. You don't have a garden around your service kotti. Consider using Forest gifts and Public Gardens.

Amelia made another big sip, squinting with pleasure.

- Noted. I'll ask people in a station for locations and edible varieties of local herbs, nuts and berries.

- Yes, it will help you survive. Ask the Selvas, they are the natives here, and the Forest is the main source of food for many of them. And a big part of their lives in general.

- I understand them completely.

- For others, the food they foraged was used as payment for more complex, interesting food from coffee shops. Why bother when it can be prepared by specially trained people using tried and tested family recipes? The coffee makers were usually the owners of the most delicious

secret recipes. Omillians love coffee shops, life and exploring new tastes. It's a huge part of Omillian culture.

- A great part of a great culture. Most things are sensible and fine-tuned. I think I have the same goals in life. Kantinians have one tavern that serves one district. And people of the other district, seeing unusual face always wonder why I am here. I can't explain to them that I was tired of my local tavern's menu and wanted to try something new. They just don't understand.

So I usually say I'm here because of my militia work, and I'm too hungry to go to my local tavern. They buy it. You know... I've always wondered how my life would have turned out if I'd been a part of Prime's or Omill's life... They say we are exactly where we deserve to be. I wonder what I did to deserve that.

- In that case, you have nothing to lose. Kantinians are also sick foodists.

- But they're not hedonists. There's no pleasure for them. Duty, traditions, but no pleasure. I think joy comes from knowing how hard life is, but instead of being angry about it, you take advantage of it by enjoying all the pleasures that can be enjoyed. For me, this is the local fusion of Nordic and Selva culture. The local humour, refined in its simplicity, reflects this perfectly. Unlike the humour in Prime, which is hilarious but sometimes hard to understand if you're not a witch and don't know some local trends. It's so annoying sometimes to be an alien everywhere you go... But fortunately, two things are always understandable and universally good, no matter where you are. Food and nature.

- Agreed. - Lucille clapped her hands happily. - Speaking of which... While I was talking to you, I finished the ale I was going to take home with me, and I intend to get some flower pollen ale instead. I recommend it. It's totally aletastic. You should try it if you never have.

- I certainly won't miss it.

Nodding with approving enthusiasm, Lucille resolutely extended her hand.

- Give me your water pouch, then.

- It's full of water.

- I can get you another one.

- Yes, please. It will come in handy. And it'll make a nice souvenir for me. Pick the nicest one, please.

- I will.

- Thank you.

Amelia's eyes narrowed in gratitude, Lucille saluted cheerfully and ducked nimbly into one of the buildings, returning a short time later with a couple of charming little water bags of ale.

- How many jewels or seeds do I owe you? - the Kantinian clapped his hands in admiration.

- Take it as a gift. With your curiosity, you'll need a lot of payment things in this city. - the Omillian winked.

- Alrighty...

The service woman motioned for her interlocutor to wait and leaned over to her huge travelling bag.

Of course, it is almost impossible to find the right thing at the right moment, not only in a rucksack, but also in a small belt bag. From which the desired thing seems to evaporate or melt, spreading along the folds.

However, at the cost of an incredible effort, Amelia excavated the bag and explored the bottomless abyss to the very bottom, puffing and blowing. With the look of a winner, she took a beautifully carved box out of the naughty bag and handed it to Lucy.

- ...Then take this as a gift...

- What is it?

- Open the shell. It's a mobile clothing repair kit. A valuable item in Kantene. You can pay with it or keep it for yourself.

- It looks so beautiful and authentic! I think I'll leave it... I've never held something like this before. This carving on a shell... It's amazing.

- My sister does it.

- Thank you very much. It's much appreciated. But... You know. There is something else you can do for me in return.

- What would that be?

- Tell me something interesting about your Department.

- Oh... Just to unburden my soul and complain about this bunch of idiots. With pleasure. But it's a sort of sadistic pleasure. So... Where to start... So that it's not negative... Hmmm.

Ami was distracted by staring at a mushroom cap against an endless starry sky. Her Now was all here, occupying all that flowery and coffee-scented space after sunset under those majestic, beautiful clay pots beneath the glowing mushroom.

This life was dissolved in flavours and tastes.

There was no more old Ami or future Ami. Except the one who was here with this overwhelming beauty and deliciousness.

"Amelia. The question."

She managed to turn her gaze to her beautiful water bag.

...A true work of art. How do they make those patterns on the surface?

"Amelia."

Ah, yes... The question.

- Everything is so great here. - she said in a blissfully apologetic tone for the delay. - I don't even want to go home in my mind. But I'll do it.

- Start with the negative, if that's the only way. - Lucy shook her head a little sympathetically. - What have you been up to?

She took a sip from the bag to sweeten the memory. And smiled involuntarily.

A meadow of flowers bloomed in her mouth. She sniffed happily, letting the scent run down her nose.

Delicious. Another beautiful note on this light full of experiences... Sometime, she would get used to the wonders of Omill, including the gastronomic ones, and they would stop surprising her...

But not now. The Department.

- As I said... I haven't done anything important in the last few cycles...

Ami took a larger sip and exhaled blissfully, as if she were talking about someone else's vexing life and continued somewhat aloofly.

- …Take this report to Prime... take that stuff to Omill… Go to Wanda to ask her what she didn't share with Oke... and share it. You go to that new guy... what's his name... and tell him that if he doesn't start working, he'll have to be thrown out of the city, we won't feed the Youlle freeloaders here… But he wasn't from Youlle, of course. I wish he were. Then I will feed and provide for him myself, just so he has a chance to learn something about his city. But I think the Primes would have been ahead of me here…

- Youlle freeloaders! - Lucille snorted. - That's a funny expression. When I first heard it from my aunt, I was very surprised and wanted to see them.

- You wouldn't come to see them even if they came. - Ami snorted, slightly annoyed. - Like all good things, they'd be

quickly outed in our city. There's no room for anything great here. Disgustingly working dung filters...

- My great-great-great-grandmother was also driven out of Kantine.

- What a lucky woman... - Ami sighed again, sipping her ale after her cold coffee. - She seems to have been a nice lady...

- Yes, she was, they say. - Lucy smiled.

Ami pulled out of the pouch... the last biscuit. The tastiest last bite.

She should eat more consciously.

The biscuits, like all good things, wouldn't last forever. They shouldn't be taken for granted.

- Great-grandmother loved Kantine. - Lucille also sipped from the bag, chugging her coffee and puffing approvingly. - If she hadn't been banished because of her abilities... she wouldn't have gone anywhere on her own. A lot of people say that, by the way. Some even have warm feelings for their homeland, despite the way they've been treated.

- And some don't, even though they weren't treated that way... The funny thing is that the Kantinians themselves were forced to leave Youlle in ancient times. And it taught them nothing.

- They left Youlle of their own free will, as far as I know.

- That's the old lie... Personally, I don't believe it. There's something behind it. I can feel it. Or maybe I'm just paranoid. The Kantinian version says that after our exodus from Youlle, the North didn’t survive at all and everyone died there. "The useless witches sat on the shoulders of the hard-working farmers as an aeon burden and couldn't cope when we were gone," they say. To hear them tell it, they're the only ones who work on the Mainland, and others just come to rest and eat at their expense. I think it's just another lie. And Primean sources have a different view as well. It was an incredibly advanced and technologically advanced society, they say. They couldn't have just disappeared.

- We'll never know. Lucy shrugged. - At least as long as Youlle is still sealed with something.

- Someone is keeping the seal alive. - Amelia pointed her finger at the rough table with dark confidence. - Someone is in there. As far as I've heard, no one has got into the city, most explorers have come back with nothing... Some never even came back, at least not through Kantine. Either they got

in, and it's so good they stayed, or it's so bad they died.

- Maybe they continued on to Lim, it's a long way, of course, but it's possible.

- They could... But then Lim should have the information about Youlle... And it will be known on the Mainland. But there's nothing. Maybe, it's just my theory, some of them are among the amnesiacs. My mother was one of them, as far as I know... But... perhaps it's just more gossip. I'm not sure. We don't talk about it... And her notes are silent on the subject.

- Humans could also be near the Elven Forest. - Lucille suggested - Or in it...

- And the Elves kidnapped them.

- What?! - Lucy laughed. - Another theory?

- Not mine, thankfully... But funny. You're laughing, huh! And our people say it in a serious tone. Especially if the travellers are male, the Kantinians warn.

- But why?!

- They believe that all Elves are female. Imagine that.

Ami made a sceptical, mocking face.

Lucy chuckled.

- Impossible! As far as I know from Selvas, Elves are neither male nor female!

- Go explain it to projecting ones...

- And I really don’t remember anything about Elves receiving “guests”.

- The Primean archives have very little information on elves, but they do have it. So Elves do talk, and they do have “guests” from time to time, I suppose.

I wish I could check it out for myself. I'm really interested in Elves. And I wonder what really happens to those who reach Youlle? Who holds the barrier? What is this barrier? Why is it there? Do people still live there? Without any contact with the outside world... I can understand why Youlle has cut itself off from Kantine. But why with the rest of the Mainland? All cities exchange goods and labour all the time... Information, at least. How do they survive in such isolation? And more importantly, why? What are they hiding? Do they only interact with Elves and Dwarves? The lucky ones... If that's the case. I have so many questions, you see! And I have heard terrible stories from those who have tried to find answers.

- You should also check the Temple Archives if you're really interested. Go to the Witchery first. Ask Finnian for

access once you've joined the Temples. It will be an extra payment for your unwanted job. You're so curious. I wonder why you don't want to be the Archivist. As for me... even I have never thought about it. I only know what people say about it.

- You had access to the local Archives and never wondered! - The Kantinian sighed with envy. - I desperately wanted this information and had no access... How does it work like this for everyone?

- There's a time and place for everything.

- I want to believe... But I think life is simply sadistic and likes to laugh at us. And I'd rather not mess with Finnian .

- He’s a reasonable person. Rough, but reasonable. And he welcomes curiosity.

- That's good news. I hope that I will be listened to and then burned, and not the other way round. Well, I scoured the Kantine Archives with my staff access, but there was nothing but lies and propaganda... I tried Prime Public Archives. There was other... more reliable information, but there was no coherent answer to my questions... I wanted to see the maps. But even maps are not clear. I took the maps of Kantine and guess what?! Advanced Primians have no idea what modern Kantene looks like. But I learned a lot about the history of my city... So stupid. How could it be?

- Maybe they're not interested.

- Maybe not. But if they want to correct it, all they have to do is look down the Mountain. Anyway, my Kantinian sources of knowledge about the Mainland are no better... The most reliable information on any subject is my mother's vague notes. And they say almost nothing about Youlle, except that a rapid development and the emergence of technology has something to do with Northerners contacting the Elven community, but... Elves. They're not technologically advanced at all. From what I've heard, they're natural beings who rarely use any kind of dwelling, preferring to sleep in trees. There's no place for advanced technology here, as far as I can see.

- The whole of the Mainland is still puzzling over this city.

- Right. So what we have is hay-headed witches who invented a lot but couldn’t survive without a bunch of idiots because they all were freeloaders… I’m the one who’s puzzled here. So, you know... I'd probably go to Youlle myself. After all the cities of the Mainland. Once you've seen them all, you can disappear. Not a problem.

- One visit won't be enough. The cities reveal more secrets each time you visit.

- It's true. You can never get bored with them.

- But first I really want to see the Elves. Ever since I was ungrown.

- You shouldn't go too far. You can meet Elves in a local Forest.

- I'm not rare in the Forest, you know. But I never have.

- They say if you're not ready to see them, you won't see them.

- I'm more than ready!

- Then you'll see them... Who knows. Many Omillians never see them. And never wanted to.

- But I want to!

- Perhaps your culture hasn't prepared you to see Elves. Ask Selvas for advice. Elves are not uncommon guests in their forest districts.

Ami twirled her pouch from side to side, estimating the amount of flower ale left... It wasn't that much.

- And if I meet any Elves, I'll ask them about Youlle.

Lucy scoffed.

- They’re usually not interested in our human fuss.

- Maybe they have seen something. Why hasn't anyone asked them? Maybe someone did ask... I am eager to prove that the kantinian agenda is a lie, and that the Youlle freeloaders have not only survived, but thrived. Just as the technologically and culturally advanced Primian freeloaders have advanced. But we know it will change nothing. They will continue to say the same things because of the benefits.

- They forget that witches have their own difficulties. - the Omillian reminded in a conciliatory tone. - They compare physical and mental work. Both are exhausting in different ways. And in general, how many additional problems arise because of this damned delicate mental organisation... Sometimes I think it's better to be more practical and down to the ground.

- Yes. Because they are stupid, they get their problems out of a kind of cognitive laziness. So they are actively fixing it physically. And they're flattered as hard workers because nobody wants to be without supplies. If you're going to say that these people's heavy egos are probably designed to keep them from being blown away by the local gusty winds, you'd probably be right. But Primian winds are much stronger, and their city is not yet in the Ocean without such tricks.

- Primians have their own heavy egos. You idealise witches. Witchcraft doesn't make people or their cities perfect. I know a lot of disgustingly arrogant Primean witches who aren't known for their modesty. I'm a witch... When I'm in Kantine, I try not to show it, so as not to embarrass Aunt Frieda in front of the locals. I know they don't like it and I like them and I don't want to upset anyone. Although, of course, everyone already knows everything. But family ties are sacred to your people. They don't want to upset Auntie and me either. We respect each other, and that's the greatest thing any human being can do. Rising above differences

- Yes. But this will last until your first offence, and you will be judged more harshly. Everyone there knows everything about everyone else, you're right. Ask anybody about anybody. They'll have a bigger file than your neighbourhood order officer has. Houses keep vulgar secrets and no one is interested in the real us. The Kantinian spirits are as boring as our architecture.

- And look at Omill. It's full of witches, but our kotties are mostly monotonously round, as if there were no other shapes on a Mainland. Even the murals are pretty much the same. Believe it or not, I actually like the Kantine. Not just because of the cosiness, the craftsmanship, the stability, the tasty food, the comfortable clothes and the beautiful green kotties. Most of all, I love the beautiful buildings, all of which have gardens around the kotties and even on their roofs. Fresh food every light! Also, unlike Prime, it is not difficult to find a really useful and meaningful job. Work hard and you'll be fed and respected. You can feel each vegetable's contribution to the dish and appreciate the flavour it brings. Abundance in every way. Kantine is great.

- Abundance of stupidity. I'm glad you like it. I'm incredibly glad we swapped. And I know it’s not about the city, it's about me. I don't want to change Kantine. It's really nice in its own way, really. I hate people. But if they're okay with a city and with each other... Then something is wrong with me. I... just want to find my own cosy place. You've been lucky to appear here.

Ami tried to take another sip from the liquid in her ale bag. There was nothing left.

It was good. Everything was good tonight.

- Exactly. Being born in Omill is like finding a meadow with lots of berries. But follow the path you believe in. Focus on what you want. And you'll be happy. And you will succeed.

And there won't be time to be jealous. And then there'll be nothing to be angry about or envious of. I'm perfectly happy here, and I like to visit Kantine. It's unchangeable, no matter what happens.

Lucy yawned blissfully and stretched.

- Home? - Ami suggested, catching her as she relaxed.

- Yes, - she smiled broadly. - I need to do a final pack and get ready for my journey.

Ami took out a cloth and began to wipe down her drinking vessels.

- Thanks for your company! Somehow we ended up talking about work and slipping into the mysteries of the Mainland... It was nice to have someone to talk to... not about the weather and the harvest.

- It's mutual! - Lucy smiled. - I'm glad to have such an interesting colleague.

The Archivist pointed again to Ami's house, repeated the instructions, and everyone went... home??

Ami's Omill... home?? For half a cycle! Fantastic!

"Say what you want, but it's a success."

Yes. Thank you for pushing me to make this brave, sick decision... At least we have this happiest light of our lives. Even if it's the first and the last happy light simultaneously, it doesn't matter.

Amelia walked happily past marvellous round kotties, and their windows softly glowed with witch's lights. It looked especially great against a background of slightly shimmering and glowing mushrooms in the distance under the night luminaries, which for some reason seemed larger than usual.

Unbeknownst to her, she wasn't following the pointed direction.

...a Secretary. I can't even begin to imagine.

Doesn't matter. Here are some deadly secrets and the VST Agent. So great.

Can you relax? Just walk down these streets and feel that it has always been like this. It'll always be like this.

"So dark. It's so late. Where is the house? What if we're lost?

Lost in the sauce, as usual... Yes. We must go back to the blue mushroom and try to remember and follow the directions. That will be a good idea.

But even if we're lost... It doesn't matter. We can walk around the mushroom as long as we like.

Tomorrow there'll be no working light, and we can get

lost forever in this beautiful city. Until the working light comes.

And, what's more important, never come back to Kantine.

“Never want to come down, never want to put my feet back down on the ground.” - rang out in her mind, part of a great song she once heard in Prime, reflecting a current mood.

...Nevertheless, the Kantinian soon found her service Omill kotti.

Or... in a place she believed was her kotti, but she was high enough and tired enough to be careless.

Anyway, it's empty... No one will claim it until tomorrow. And tomorrow we will see with a rested head.

So she just set her bags down on the dusty floor and exhaled in relief. And sat down on the hastily wiped corner of the bed... of her own Omillan kotti! Can you believe it?!

A place that would be her home for half a cycle. A very dusty place, by the way, but why bother?

She's not hungry, and she's got a roof and walls to protect her from the night chill that was on the other side of the door cloth.

The good thing about Omill's kotti was that, unlike the windy houses of Kantine, with their massive doors and windows, the doors of Omill's warmer kotti were only covered with thick door cloths, which ensured a constant supply of fresh air. And a certain amount of dust. And a bit cold.

But there were more positives than negatives. Standing unused for so long, a Kantine house would have certain smells of its own. And the smells of those who lived there. Omill's uninhabited quarters smelled of nothing but dust, ground, and clay.

Amelia pulled back the heavy flap of the water pipe and watched the water slowly fill the bowl. Why did it never overflow? And where does it come from?

Questions, questions.

One light we will have to have a look at the local water pipes. In Kantine they got their water from artificial lakes dug all over the city and filled by rain, or from a natural lake outside far from the city if it hadn't rained for a long time. Or they collected rainwater that ran down pipes from the roof directly into a container in the house.

While she was thinking, Ami found a cleaning cloth among her belongings. The kind she took with her so she didn't have to sit on the floor when she took a break.

Hopefully she won't have to go travelling or camping any time soon and will have time to clean it. And buy another one.

It was a strange adventure and a strange time. What a Secretary she is...

After wiping the bedside table, the armchair and the surrounding floor, she dumped the contents of her camping bag on half the bed.

Food. Clothes. Toiletries.

I've to put it all somewhere... I've to get some bags. Canvas bags and duffel bags. It'll make life easier.

Is it worth trying to settle down? Yes, she still has deep doubts, no matter what happens.

"Later."

Right... This light, she was tired from the road and the long light. And the remnants of ale in her system were already lulling her to sleep.

It was getting darker. Most of the satellites were gone, and kotti's windows didn't help either.

She found the make-up bag with the dental tape and pulled it from the pile almost by feel.

As she did so, another bag slipped out and fell to the floor with a thud, maliciously spilling some of its contents all over the floor.

It was the last thing she needed right now. An extra source of light would be nice right about now.

How do we get some light in here?

There's a lamp...

But it's a witch's lamp! It's no use, she can't light it anyway.

Non-witch difficulties in a witch town have officially begun. Congratulations.

One of the night lamps peered through the open door curtain, casting a soft, enchanting bluish-purple light into the room.

Very pretty.

But for Ami's purposes, it didn't suit me very well at the moment. Because it was outside. It's a street lamp.

"Hmmm. Can we... borrow one? For a while?"

Unlawful conduct by an officer of the law.

So... what? It's not permanent.

She'll put her important things in their proper places, wipe the dust off, pick up the crap that's happily fallen on the floor, wash her face, brush her teeth... and put the lamp back on. That's it. No one will get hurt.

She hopes. Besides, it's the end of the alley, and it's her fault and her problem that she'll have a dark yard.

Determined, Ami got out and, drowning out the voice of conscience as best she could, went to the pole with the nearest lamps.

There were three of them hanging from the slingshot.

"Grab one, hide it under your clothes and leave before anyone sees you."

She looked closely at the transparent clay cups on the ropes. They shimmered, giving off a bluish, grass-coloured glow... What was in them? Plants. Wow. They were all... different! Inside one lamp was a group of glowing mushrooms with round caps. What a party people .

Ami grinned.

Wait a moment. Do these mushrooms feel good inside? How do they light up? Do they need an external light, do they shine by themselves?

"There is no time to investigate the nature of these mushrooms' luminescence, and only one way to find out."

But we can kill them!

"Take them if they don't feel well - we'll bring them back immediately."

She took a transparent clay jar and peered curiously into the other.

It was filled with glowing moss... Or something that looked like moss. With little pointy shimmering leaves and small flowers.

She wondered if these plants came from the local Forest or had been specially cultivated. Why do they live in clay circles when it would be more logical to make them reflective linings?

More questions... And no time to ponder.

Sorry, mushrooms. We'll bring you back soon anyway.

Ami herself hates being trapped indoors.

The forced criminal took the chosen orb of light from the branch of a slingshot, hid it under her clothes and went back to the kotti.

"That's better."

She hung the lamp on the first hook she could find on the wall.

"Now we can see... everything!"

More dust, aha... So. What's that strange sound of something hitting the floor? What's that now? Mother's cards... Damn you, things. Chill now.

Ami picked up the dirty pieces with an exhausted sigh.

They're crumpled... But they're not afraid any more. After what happened to them, there's nothing to be afraid of.

The tattered cards and the shattered Ami. Two unwanted creations of a mother...

...Why did you start if you're too weak to finish?!

Ami lowered herself onto the uncluttered half of the still unmade bed and placed the shards nearby, carefully spreading them out.

Unwanted memories of a past life. Such jagged edges and such small fragments... Could they be joined?

The light bulb was far away and everything was barely visible.

...like being in a dark barn, where she could only look and read with the door ajar or through a slit in the window... Otherwise her mother would notice...

The dictionaries were smaller and could be taken out under her clothes so that her mother would not see them if they never left Ami's room...

But it happened more often than Ami would have liked when unwanted people visited the room.

The punishment was insufficiently severe. But the map…

The Kantinian no longer remembers what her mother's map originally looked like. The ungrown one's eyes were wide and full of tears as she saw her mother angrily destroy such a beautiful thing...

…they were caught together in a barn.

Was it... necessary? Why does she hate them so much?

...What was she like before she settled in Kantine?

The sullen creature she knew was incapable of creating something like this. To even think of going anywhere to create something like that. She'd barely left the house, trembling at the slightest shadow, draft, noise... It was only by circumstantial evidence that one could conclude that the notes belonged to her or were of value to her. These outbursts of aggression could not lie.

...She did it.

For sure. She couldn't lie here, couldn't hide it.

There was a chance that Ami had jumped to conclusions based on the fact that the names of her mother and the vagrant cartographer matched. Maybe the impostor she knew had never been Yvette the Restless, but only pretended to be her...

Indeed... that would explain a lot.

Ami picked out something familiar from the fragments and placed it on top of the others. It was a pity she hadn't explored the Mainland herself, to put it mildly. But at least she saw more than just Kantine's fields.

Here it was, by the way...

She placed it in the middle of the bed.

This side would be Prime. On the Prime Mountain.

Prime's beacon to guide travellers here. How pleasantly similarly drawn... So beautiful. That's why she wanted to see it with her own eyes.

Posh Prime was Ami's favourite spot on the map. It was probably her favourite real city as well.

The Royal Palace... torn in half. Not great, huh? Not great...

...That's a lot of power and anger to tear a strong fabric like that...

And this is... the VST Academy. There, behind it, a little further away, is a wonderful restaurant, the taste of its crowning spiced vegetable soup seemingly still in Ami's mouth...

If this were her map, she would definitely add that restaurant. And many others. In general, she would make a map with restaurants and all sorts of other interesting things. For curious eaters like herself. And she'd certainly add a huge volume of menu descriptions.

And that's where you could put Omill's parts. A little further away… A few more beautiful pieces. Now we can see everything for ourselves. Very nice.

There are also some very skilfully painted orienteering mushrooms, kotties, a Forest and a Sacred Hill with a pond on it.

This town was painted in great detail... Maybe it really was Ivette's home town. Maybe not, but she spent a lot of time here.

Good choice though. Why didn't you stay here, stupid?

And again the jagged edge... The City Chiefment is somewhere around here... Or is it here? No, it's probably not from here at all... But now it's easy to find out by wandering around.

...assuming she stays here long enough, of course.

"Do. Not. Even. Start. It. Again."

Alrighty... Somewhere out there are the Hollow Mountains. And the Zeth in them.

It's known for lots of holes and big mushrooms. Dwarves. Their runes deep inside the mountains. Jewels. Beautiful views from the top. And Selvas.

Looks like a great place to stay.

How far is it? What is on the way there? It could be our next town. If we find a job here... If.

And there's a city where, as far as we know these lights, there's never any work for service people. Lim.

Where to put it? Actually, Ami has no idea where Lim is.

Leave them... here...

Lovely signs on round mounds, looking a bit like kotties... and overgrown mounds. Other unknown things... Forest is near. Gardens. Lots of green there. That's all you can tell from the map.

Connecting pieces of the map is enough of a problem. Ami can't analyse parts of the city she's never seen. And almost no one has seen it.

It’s a far outstanding old witch city. There's very little information about Lim on the mainland. For some reason. Perhaps it's as hospitable as Youlle.

The map shows that this settlement itself is much smaller. It's hard to even call it a city - it's a thin rim in a semicircle around a lake.

Here's another piece that looks like it might fit. Two, in fact.

It's torn in half and next to something... it's... the lake again?

Curious... How is it positioned? Like this? Or no, like this...

It's all torn and scarred too. Somewhere around here there's a rumour that there's an Ocean with mysterious Maras in it...

It is huuuuuge... Amelia saw it from Prime Mountain.

Impressive. Wish she could see it closer. And die of happiness. It must be a fantastic sight.

To see, smell and touch the Ocean. Will he ever be able to? Or will she die foolishly without ever meeting it?

She returned her wet eyes to the surviving fragments of Lim. Those signs on the houses were incredibly beautiful and so compelling to look at.

And... they wouldn't let go of her attention.

Ami admired them. A cold whisper ran down her neck.

She shook herself, averted her gaze and shifted it to the

opposite side of the Mainland, beyond the Kantine.

Hills. Hills and lots of flowers.

Amelia had seen them during her time in the Kantine; she liked to walk to the edge of the cliff to look out over the Wastelands. It was said that Elves and Dwarves could be found in those places, but of course, Ami had never come across any of the marvellous people.

Beyond the Hills was an empty circle. A place of destiny. A mainlandwide mystery.

A mystery that had dragged the mother through Kantine and kept her there for some time. Long enough to capture her.

Her overconfidence and subsequent overly close relationship with the local culture and her host had been her fatal flaw. She didn't realise she was in way over her head.

Kantine was a part of Yvette’s anthropological research in trying to find information about Youlle, which was notorious over the Mainland as a “people-eating city”.

It's unclear whether the blank spots around her were the result of the mother's own vandalism of her kink. This part was quite shabby and suffered the most.

This was where Youlle was supposed to be. At least that was Ami's assumption.

A guess from someone who couldn't even put the pieces together in the right order. She didn't see this part of the Continent herself either. You should stop using this phrase, which you hear so many times a light. It carries too much sadness.

But... Yvette saw the city. And it was not much fun for her either.

Fascinated by the shining Youlle, she decided not to despair. She walked around it, hoping to find a secret passage or people who would share some insights with her, and then returned to Kantine, determined to gather information, to extract bits of truth from local legends and Archives, and thus learn more about the mysterious northern city.

Anyone who knows the Kantinians can understand how they helped Yvette in her quest. They shook their heads warningly and told the usual tale of "wicked witches" who had ruined so many lives that the planters had to find a new home.

They could be kind to non-witch Yvette, even if she was a foreigner. Their warnings didn't stop her.

No one knows what happened to her after that, but

everyone knows she came back, silent and frightened. They told her! Being the object of their pity is the best way to fit into the community.

"This fool is more stupid than we are. It's safe to leave her here."

Flip it all. That's when it all started.

Ami sighed heavily and quickly gathered the fragments back into the bag.

Enough memories, it was time to settle down in a new place. A new life for half a cycle and new fruitless hopes.

Oh, my! Look at it!

It was invisible without the light, but it turned out that her old, shabby looking kotti was full of secrets too! There were fantastic paintings inside!

Niiiice. What a sudden pleasant little good-looking miracle.

Admiring it, she decided to draw a series of intricate elements from all the local murals. And to try as many local foods and drinks as possible.

"Think of this as the only reason you are here and the purpose of your life. Don't think about this job. This head is for eating and that's it."

The Kantinian pulled out a little bag containing her small supply of food. Both fresh and dried seeds and berries. It's not much, but it's enough for a few treats and a few household items. And that was a good start.

She looked away. Her eyes fell on a mountain of things and she picked up a puffy book. A Kantinian-Omillian dictionary with her mother's notes in the margins.

Ami set it down beside her. Now there's someone who would definitely be her constant companion during this time.

And there are other companies to thank and release.

After the blankets have been placed on the free half of the bed, the mushroom-lighters can be thanked for their help with the cleaning and carried back to their place.

There is absolutely no energy left to do anything else. No thoughts. No worries. Just sleep. Just sleep.

Light 7. One more light of freedom

Ami woke up.

What's happening? What are those unusual smells? What's that strange breeze? Where was the cool breeze

coming from? And why was she sleeping with her legs tucked up?

For a while, the Kantinian didn't know where she was. The fact that she was sleeping in her clothes didn't surprise her. It was a normal practice.

But the other questions demanded answers...

... So she opened her eyes.

It's drifting in from behind.....that door curtain?

Oh, my gnats! She's in Omill! It's real!

But we are here for a weird, inappropriate, incomprehensible job... Still happy?

Yes.

And the bit of unpacked stuff that didn't fit on the bedside table was on her legs and around them.

It is fiiine. This mess will keep us busy for a while. We need to clean this place up, so we need more rags. There must be a Market somewhere.

But firstly... we've got to get to work.

We have a free light to settle here, but we also have anxiety. We're not familiar with the neighbourhood. We need to know the road that will take us to work. And we need to know the exact light when we start work. We forgot to ask Milo a light before, and we require more instructions.

Also, a light, before Ami thinks she saw the familiar outlines of warehouses nearby. That would be a good neighbourhood for us as well. It's not clear where they are exactly, but it's good to know they're here.

So. What have we got?

A lot of tasks. And a starting point. She remembers how to get to the place she visited earlier.

Already better and more than nothing. Ami found her usual bag among the mountain of her belongings and hurriedly threw in everything she thought she needed and could find among the scattered items. The rest would have to be sorted into duffel and laundry bags after she had cleaned and dusted the place... Later.

And the inspired one has already jumped out of her kotti and looked around.

It's a great view! The greatest.

Hello, hills and forest in the distance, hello, delicious Omill air, hello, kotti... You're gorgeous!

Gorgeously round. Like all the marvellous dwellings here, brown with a glimmer of white building clay, a greenish-purple tinge to the roof and lightly draped with

vines... Simple and charming, proven by countless cycles of use.

And now, for about half a cycle, one of these beauties belongs to her. Majestic. One could only hope that they'd get on and get along.

Well, it's time to find the road. By all means.

Everything looks completely different in the daytime, but visual memory and the blue Mushroom had led them to the right spot. It wasn't as blue as it looks in the evening, but it's still the closest one. So this could be used in orienteering. Obviously. Otherwise, they wouldn't be called landmark Mushrooms.

And it's time to take advantage of the location of her kotti, near one of the city's finest cafes. As the owner of an excellent nose and a stomach always hungry for goodies, she couldn't pass by the place she had recently discovered.

The alien entered the café without a shadow of a doubt, with the obvious intention of picking up something new and interesting.

It would be a crime to rush to work at the expense of the quality of life in Omill. Anywhere but Omill. The Omillians themselves were of the same opinion.

And Ami is here to ensure that the local laws are strictly adhered to.

That way, finding the Temples would be more fun.

And a moment later, her order was ready. A cute, witch-inspired greeting from the hostess bobbed above the surface of the coffee. Sooo cuuuute!

How could she have just walked right past such a miracle? Impossible. Inexcusable.

The Kantinian shrieked with delight, amusing the barista, and happily headed off to her new city.

She took the first sip and looked around.

Wow! Everything is so bright, so fresh, so beautiful... It would take some getting used to.

She sighed blissfully and turned her head from side to side, trying to find her way, wandering down the seemingly familiar street, looking at the kotties with such interest, as if she were seeing them for the first time.

They are always curious and wonderful, no matter how often and how long you look at them.

They look a bit like Prime desserts. Are these houses in the shape of cakes, or cakes in the shape of houses? Hmmm... Given that all ideas come from the same source, this natural

shape could simply be handy for witches in both baking and building.

With her thoughts and coffee, Ami didn't notice that she appeared near the Temple Square. Turning off her mind was always the best way to succeed. Her mind was focused on problems and rarely helped. Only to find more problems and fears to think about endlessly.

The coffee-based method of switching it off was tasty, pleasant and effective.

This Temple Tower. It's a great landmark. Even without being a mushroom. Too bad it's not a mushroom. The Mushroom Tower would look good here.

"Besides, you could just ask for directions. Where the Truth Station was definitely no secret."

No, I couldn't. There's no grave danger or anything.

A quick way is a way without coffee, sweets and a walk through the city. It would be a stupid, unnecessary deprivation.

Amelia stopped in the middle of the Temple Square and looked around.

How much space! Not only did the monumental buildings not impose their authority on the passers-by, but they actually adorned the whole complex, creating an independent, authentic architectural composition in the middle of the city. It could even be a tourist attraction in its own right, just for the sight of all this.

A pleasant place to work. And quite respectable. Not like their squat administrative buildings in Kantine.

...Maybe Lucy is right, and Ami really does idealise witches and witch attributes, and belittles her native Land.

Or maybe not. And, at least for this grumpy little service woman, things are what they are. There is only one way to find out.

Before entering the building with which her vaguely frightening future was associated, Ami stomped hesitantly, exhaled and took a step inside, pushing aside the entrance curtain.

The curtain let Amelia through and returned to its usual place.

Those smells... earth, clay, coffee! It's her workplace now. Great. Look at this place!

After several visits to the Hall of Expectations, it was almost familiar. But that familiarity did not make it any less charming.

The bright, broad rays of light coming through the windows made the light inside soft and diffuse, creating an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity. The coffee place was empty now. Unless you were to count the dust and the dark specks that danced in the light as guests.

A new Secretary looked away from the enchanting picture, sighed again and walked resolutely towards Milo's office, just as the boss came out of the room, frowning at the clay tablets in his hands.

He glanced up at the visitor.

- Oh! Not empty-handed. - He noticed the cup in her hands. - With coffee.

- With an empty coffee cup. - Shaking the empty container, Ami corrected. - Came back for further instructions.

Milo nodded.

- Did you find your kotti?

- Yes, Lucy helped a lot.

- That's our Lucy! She always does that. Is everything all right?

- Yes, everything's fine, just need some tidy up a bit there.

- Then I'll give you a light to help you settle in. It won't hurt anyone. Tomorrow, after sunrise on the third satellite, you can start work.

- Acknowledged. Good... Great, actually.

- Is there a problem?

- Apart from the fact that I've never done secretarial work before and, despite the instructions, I still have no idea how to work?

- Yes, apart from that.

- None at all.

- That's fine. I'll see you in the next light. If you come to see me, I'll show you the sign for the opening of the curtain at the entrance to your place of work.

- Which I can't use without being a witch. - Ami frowned.

- Oh, right... - Milo frowned too, confused. - Sealing an Archive is an essential protocol, and you can't escape it. So many issues... Well, we'll start solving them step by step.

- Yeah. We'll have to take it one step at a time. And don't look at the whole mountain of problems, or I'll get hysterical.

- Yes. As with any difficult case. We'll put hysteria on the list too, as a last resort. In the meantime, start with the

household.

- Got it! I'll make the most of my free time in the city.

- Let's do it. Good luck. - Milo smiled mischievously. - Don't overdo it.

- Not to clean up the whole city? - Amelia gave a grin.

- You never know. Kantinians are so industrious.

Ami wiped the coffee residue from the cup with the hem of her top clothes and hastily shoved the cup into her bag.

- That certainly doesn't apply to me... - She shook her head. - Like many kantinian things. I'm not a typical Kantinian.

- Well, then there's nothing to worry about. - Milo waved his hand and returned to the transport of documents.

The employee left the dwelling of soft light and the coffee smell and hurried outside. So she had a free light before she started work, to settle in and get everything she needed... Splendid.

She'd have time for that. Before she locked herself in the dark indoors, she needed to take a proper walk.

But before that, let it all be excitingly bright, witchy and beautiful. Round houses. Mushrooms. A big Hill and a Forest in the distance. Lots of new and unexplored things... It's hard to know where to begin.

A single light is not enough for everything. But half of the cycle will do. She doesn't have to do everything in one light. But the problem is that she really wants to.

Because everything is so unstable. Pfff - and she's gone. While walking. While sleeping. Or not so dramatic, just “get out of our city, loser” again.

Alright… “step by step” he said, and panic is the last thing to go.

A few more questions, then.

Where's the nearest Market? Or is it better to go straight for the rags to the Caravans she already knows where they are? Maybe. It's just a matter of figuring out how to get there from here. Or... better to go and see where it takes her. That way we can explore some new roads. And the Market might be the first one we hit. One of the Markets.

So. Quality time again. Good, good. Next question.

Which direction should we go first? Or better yet, how do you go in all directions at once...

...try all the coffees and biscuits at once, so that even if they kicked Ami out of Omill or the Continent or life itself

tomorrow, it wouldn't be so painfully sad.

Or you could put it another way. How do you get so many Ami to do all the things you want to do at the same time?

"There are a lot of us."

Excuse me. A... lot?

"In your head. Yes. You think if we speak one by one, it's one voice?"

Yes... And I...

"Just one of the voices."

I didn't think about it. And by the way. There's only one head, and it can't be everywhere at once. So you're a strange thought, you know. I've had lots of thoughts before, but they weren't that weird. Or were they? Doesn't matter.

Let's go... somewhere, we have a lot to do. Enjoying our lives. Not weird voices.

One light of joy in a big cycle is much more than zero. Let's start. One step at a time. Which one comes first?

That's easy. If this light were the last, what would you do? It's definitely not cleaning. No one will die if we live in this mess for one more light.

Our whole life is a mess.

So the plan is...

To visit one more café at least.

Wander around until we're hungry. Let your stomach decide where to go. If there's a Market or a Caravan on the way, we'll grab what we need and try to find our way home, because we're already lost not only in our thoughts, but also in a city.

The worst thing is that we've chosen the unknown path and don't even look at the surprises it holds. We have skipped it mindlessly, like the sips of that great ale a light before. No good.

Ami brought her mind back to the city.

The entrance curtains of the Omillian kotti immediately caught her eye. They always did, the ornaments and colours used in them being as different as the local cups.

Catchy, yes. They certainly are. You can walk around the place in great circles, just looking at the curtains and windows. And then write a scientific paper about them. And those witch diagrams inside the buildings. If only they knew what it was all about, but they don't. So frustrating.

And the shapes of the windows. How do they make them so asymmetrical? It must be incredibly complicated...

she doesn't remember the technology from the books. But it's so beautiful.

Ami knew their local window making techniques, and had no idea how to replicate this Omill style. Or she'll definitely do it at home.

Lucy was only partly right about the monotony of Omill's architecture. Yes, compared to the eye-catching fancy buildings and colourful stained-glass windows of Prime, the round houses did look rather modest. But there was a great deal of attention to detail - shapes, patterns, paintings.

It was in the variety of detail that Omill surpassed Prime, and that was its understated but attractive beauty. Discreet, practical and cosy on the outside, Omilian dwellings and people were rich on the inside, hiding an authentic spirit and hidden witchy mysteries. You have to look closely to appreciate its charm.

Really lucky. There's a small Market under this Mushroom.

It seems to have everything we need. Looks like we won't have to look for Caravans any more... More free time. Good news.

Now we can get lost in a city with all this stuff. The main thing is to get to work on time.

"Great plan. Where do we get lost first?"

Not in our thoughts again...

Ami thought and stopped thinking.

...In the scents of Omill. It's a great thing to get lost in. Lovely bouquet. Forest. Mountain like air freshness. Clay. Herbs. Ground. Coffee… Food?

Hello, appetite! You've finally got a word in. All right, choose the coffee shop.

With grim determination, she entered the first shop she saw. It wasn't that Amelia didn't trust her stomach, but the visual part of food was interfering with her plans to switch off her mind. After agonising for a while, she finally decided what she was going to have for dinner tonight. In her new kotti! Her own Omillian kotti, temporary, but... There it is. Still incredible.

And... the job.

Ami's wide smile changed for a moment to an angry grimace.

...You're dirtbags, not dreams! Why do you come true in such a strange way?! Why does everything not always go according to plan and turn into an absolute mess?

"This mess is not absolute".

Good observation. Let's make the best of it.

The traveller left the place with a belly full of anticipation and an embroidered bag of delicious biscuits and the other bag full of simple cakes made of herbs and grains.

She gazed appraisingly at the blue hills and forest in the distance that she had admired on her first visit to the city.

It was truly stunning.

They looked particularly majestic and incredibly attractive from this angle as she left the café.

Visiting them is definitely a must.

Amelia liked heights in general. Kantine didn't have any, unless you walked a lot to get the view of the Wastelands from the Frontier.

But there really wasn't much to see. Hills, and... more hills. Lots of nice flowers in a warm season. Beautiful clouds above.

Prime Mountain was more interesting because it was higher. The view is amazing. Amelia recommends.

Live Mainland map, you don't know whether to admire it or start drawing from one side and a vast Ocean-sky space from the other. Primeans are the luckiest gnats on the Continent.

Omillian big Hill is quite small compared to the Primean one. But look at it, what beauty!

We must go there. Right now.

Climb up and see the city. Reduce our good supply of wonderful biscuits there, while the eyes are fed with beauty. The view is a nice addition to any meal.

Soon she was trudging purposefully and swiftly towards the enticing heights, wondering where the path of ascent might be. Surely it must be somewhere at the junction with the widest road... the only thing left to do was to try not to stray from the path.

Beyond the main road were mostly Selvas' paths. Amelia knew this because the closer she got to the edge of the city, the more of them she encountered. Much to her delight.

They are beautiful. Graceful walk, melodious voices... Makes Ami admire and envy them.

Marvellous paintings on the mugs and inside their kotties. Colourful, catchy designs on their clothes and draperies.

There is a lot of beauty to be found on the Mainland. Almost everywhere and in everything. Here in Omill, where

you first have to suffer from the desire to see, hug, drink or eat the abundance of everything you see, and then from abstinence. It's hard to say goodbye to this land.

Immersed in thoughts and not concentrating on the difficulty of the task, the Kantinian easily found a well-trodden path to climb the Hill. In a single impulse, cutting the road, wading through bushes, catching on clothes and bags, clinging to the grass and stumbling, she literally flew up there, quickly reaching the highest point.

...And... the whole world stopped at that moment...

In the setting rays of the last departing luminary and the soft light of a couple of rising ones, the entire precious Omill lay before her.

A dark spot on the plain, lumpy with round kotties, looked like a strange pinkish-brown “speck” on the brown-green body of the Continent at sunsset, mottled with the broad lines of tracts and narrow city lanes, long “veins” of water channels.

A huge lake, the same lake whose waters gave Omill's coffee its unique flavour and medicinal properties, was surrounded by a beautiful Forest, full of familiar trees and those Amelia had never seen in Kantine. An ancient relic in the heart of the Mainland. Beautiful.

Illuminated by many small lights, Mt. Zeth and the eastern forest, much of it, if we look to our right. Beyond that green ocean is Lim, in theory. And a lot of elves somewhere in it. But in practice, none of this was visible.

Still, the sight is enchanting.

On the horizon in front of them, on the other side of Omill, there was also a second dark strip of lush vegetation, beyond which, if the mother's maps were to be believed, lay the Swamps.

The very swamps that no one had seen in person for a long time, but which remained in a collective memory as a... swear word. They couldn't be seen from here behind the forest, but they would be seen from Prime if Ami travelled to its southern edge during the cold season.

Or they wouldn't. There's always a chance that the wild Forest, protecting their secrets, won't shed its leaves. That's probably why they persist... In permanent shade.

Amelia turned her gaze once more towards the more densely inhabited part of the Mainland. A turn to higher ground.

The famous Prime Mountain was visible from here. It

could be seen from anywhere. Like a reminder of the heights you can reach with the power of your mind. And the power of your legs, of course. Getting to the top of a mountain isn't easy. In harsh weather conditions, it's hard to navigate.

That's why the colour-changing witch's beacon light is here, to be a guide for the lost. And it was about to be lit there. Would it be visible from here?

We'll see. But for now. Huge green, purple, and yellow Kantine. Which was also clearly visible from both cities.

From here, the great place of Ami's grief looked like a small, harmless, colourful patchwork of fields and meadows with small, pretty lakes.

Sorry for my attitude. I never meant to be rude or ungrateful. It's not your fault... your people are ghouls. Perhaps not all of them. You are beautiful on your own.

I can see that from here. It's better for both of us to keep our distance. We have less to hold against each other.

And I've got to stay here. With this space, with this freedom. Stay and get used to the taste of this meaningful life.

There's no going back. It’s clearly visible from here. And the journey there has been well worth it.

The hiker sat down wearily on the edge of this flat part of one of the higher peaks of the Hill, that served as her vantage point.

Only now did she realise how tired she was. And that no one was going to carry her home, and her own legs didn't really feel like it.

It was getting really dark.

The fluorescent Mushrooms had begun to change the colour of the surrounding city. One of them was an attractive blue, and she would have to remember which way to go to reach it. She would have to hurry with the descent so that he wouldn't have to do it in the dark and fall. Of course, the descent would be much faster if she fell, but that's not the desired result of hurrying.

The mighty wanderer breathed happily in the forest-scented, sunset mountain air and stared blissfully into the darkening sky. Finished admiring the surroundings, she sighed again and struggled to her feet, which responded with a searing protest.

We have to, dear ones, we have to. You'll freeze to death here. Even though it was still warm, it was already quite cold at night.

The small path, which she had not noticed from below,

was more visible from this side. So she came down without too much trouble.

The sky was cloudless and the satellites that had come out provided enough light.

As she descended, her only regret was that she hadn't seen the city in daylight. It would have helped her to know the city better.

Now she had to find her way back through it, much to the displeasure of her legs, taking the long way around and choosing the familiar streets.

If there was a decent map of this city somewhere, she'd have to get it.

With the view of the hills and the Omillian biscuits in her mind, it was easier to distract herself from the hardships of the journey. She made her exhausted way home, automatically admiring the soft light from the windows of the kotties and the flasks of glowing plants outside.

Pulling back the front curtain, she finally entered the house, putting her bag on top of the others and crawling to the bed as if it were her last effort. Resisting the urge to fall face down in the dust on the floor at the entrance and fall asleep there.

“Housekeeping” and “general arrangement”, huh? Well done.

It proved once again that the famous 'Kantinian diligence' was not her quality. Notorious “Lazy slacker” Amelia was the same everywhere.

It's the legs that do all the hard work.

But let's not diminish her achievements. That's only half true, because her bags were full of everything she needed for cleaning, even if she couldn't use it now. There was also a supply of delicious food and sweets for breakfast.

The vagabond quickly kicked off her boots and, with a great deal of effort, pulled herself under the bedspread with a pile of things on top of it, tucking her legs in obediently. It did not cause her much discomfort, however, as she fell asleep almost immediately.

Light 9. First working light

... And she woke up with a shudder.
We overslept!
"No, we haven't."

Judging by the pale purple colour, only the first of the Lumins had risen.

It's still possible to sleep for a while. Just a little nap... Getting out into the cold first working light can wait.

"Don't close your eyes. It's a trap".

Can't sleep anyway. Too anxious...

The legs are still buzzing. Even after a long rest in a dusty bed under a pile of things, getting out only to eat and satisfy some needs.

The vagabond got up reluctantly and slid out from under the covers.

Being late to first working light is no good.

His feet felt the cold of the mud floor that had cooled overnight. The dirty clay floor that hadn't been cleaned yesterday. And she had been so optimistic about setting everything in order quickly.

Sighing exhaustedly, she shook off her feet and quickly slipped them into her boots. Her feet immediately began to burn unhappily.

Aaaargh...

Limping and shuffling, the wretched service woman went to the water trough to wash herself. As if she tried to freeze and wash away all the hopelessness and confusion. How embarrassing to feel so unsettled in the first working light.

The head was disgustingly empty, if you didn't count the ringing in the ears and the foggy, cold feeling of a vague, unremembered, but dreary dream... with contents she didn't want to remember.

The remnants were... unpleasant.

Oooof... The water isn't cold! It's freezing cold!

Amelia stood stunned for a moment near the small water source, shocked by the intense discomfort.

The local water's smell penetrated this paralysing state so brightly. Earth and stone. The freshness. The sharp, vibrant aliveness.

It woke her for a moment, washing the remnants of sleep and warmth from her skin, but it left her unsure of what to do next so as not to add to the already overwhelming discomfort.

Moments later, the obvious decision was made.

The suffering alien shivered wearily and shrank back towards the warm, comfortable pile of things on a bed, cursing and clutching her frozen hands.

Not to dive back into them, she would never get to work if she did that now, but at least to get a scarf. A little bit of warmth. She desperately needed it.

Good thing the Kantinian sleeps in her clothes. Otherwise, it would have been a real disaster. She couldn't imagine having to take off what was protecting her from this morning's chill and put on something just as unpleasantly cold as the surroundings.

In general, Ami's habits and Ami's lifestyle got along quite well. No wonder. This symbiosis had been created and developed over more than one cycle.

"Time to go."

Yesss…

Amelia quickly wrapped her scarf around her neck, picked up the bag she'd packed earlier, and suddenly remembered that she hadn't eaten all the biscuits and flatbreads she'd bought, which meant her bag had some wonderful contents to support her in this anxious light.

What a fantastic discovery to make.

Things aren't so bad after all. There's a cup of coffee waiting for her somewhere in the near future. Together they would get through it.

The Kantinian exhaled and, resolutely straightening her wrinkled clothes with her hands, made her way to the entrance curtain. She bravely stepped out into the foggy, cold, troubled light, heading into the unknown.

The Temple Tower must be found first. It's a landmark.

Then there's nothing left to do but throw away all doubts and get down to business.

The newly hired Templar walked quickly along the kotties through the unknown alleys, hoping that the streets of Omill didn't have too many dead ends, unlike the high fenced streets of Kantine. She hated it with all her heart.

And… she was right about this witch city.

It nicely and wisely didn't have any dead ends, every alley had an exit and every water vein had bridges or could be easily jumped over.

Great. Really great.

Back in the light, Amelia spent a lot of time walking from one point to another in her native city. It wasn't a trivial task, as there were all sorts of fences and barriers to suit the needs of the people who lived in certain houses, and you'd be stuck with them all the time.

This "urban non-planning" turned the usual streets into

mazes and greatly increased the time and complexity of getting from one point to another. It didn't allow any newcomer or local to relax while walking around, posing non-trivial tasks like "How do I get to that house I see behind that pile of fences"?

Fortunately, this city was made for people, and its plan was practical and simple. The low buildings of Omill didn't hide the most important landmarks. The fences didn't block the route.

Troubles may lie ahead, but at least the road to them is clear, beautiful and pleasant.

She walked through the Temple Square, staring not only at the architecture, but also at the officials scurrying between the Administration and other Temples buildings. Their uniforms. So humble, practical and solid. And neat.

Amelia looked down at her rumpled, tattered clothes.

For some of these people, the Temples weren't just a place to work. It was their home. Their very way of life.

Would she be happy with that kind of integration?

Well... She could try it now in a light demonstration mode.

The service woman entered the Station and immediately encountered the Chief, who was intently examining something on the floor near the one of the visitors' benches in the Waiting Hall.

- Oh! - he noticed Ami entering. - Ready for duty?

- Ahem... No. - she replied honestly.

- Great. - This benevolent employer nicely ignored her passive-aggressive attitude. - Go get ready then… I've unsealed the Archive for you already. Keep in mind that you can't leave it unattended for a long time. So if you want to go somewhere, come to me, I'll seal and unseal the entrance and the window for you. That's how we'll do it for now. Confirmation?

- Confirmed. And what happens after "now"? - asked the Kantinian with a smirk.

He said it as if her incompetence could be overcome through practice.

- You'll learn to be a witch like normal people and things will get better. - the Omillian smiled wryly.

True. She knew it.

- Yeah. - Amelia grinned. - There's no harm in dreaming.

- Kele. - Milo waved as the handsome, long-haired

Selva entered the Hall, heading for the stairs to the second level.

Seemingly lost in thought, he flew past for some distance before the Chief's call caught up with him and reached his mind.

- Yes? - the young man frowned, stopping abruptly and flicking back his glossy black hair. - What's happened?

- Ami. She had come from Kantine to replace Lucy on a Temples communications project. - Milo introduced the new Secretary to another member of staff.

- Ah. Yeah, fine. - The subordinate nodded indifferently and continued on his way.

Something far more interesting than this news or Ami's personality occupied his thoughts at the moment.

What could it be? Anything, really. Anything that could potentially be more interesting than Ami and her business here.

Milo also introduced her to a couple of more truthful officers who came alongside this handsome Selva man, and their reserved greetings led her to the same thoughts.

No big surprise.

Amelia has gotten used to being ignored or ghosted over the course of her life.

It's much scarier to be unwillingly needed or noticed a lot, which means someone wants to use you in some way.

Uncomfortable prying attention, which would have been even more uncomfortable if she hadn't managed to sneak out of town before the nefarious Fertility Festival started and all those brainless pricks were now congratulating her on the biggest fear of her life.

But... the attention will soon find her when they need their damned documents. And hate her for not being able to find them. And to do her duties in general.

"Focus."

Amelia shook her head, trying to shake off the uncomfortable thoughts that sent an unpleasant shiver down her skin.

It is fine. That's why they're here now. To hide in the shadows and escape attention. Let's get to the workplace. It's the perfect time to start embarrassing yourself. No need to delay the inevitable.

Sighing, the new Archivist grimly accepted her fate and recklessly stepped into the dark future as if diving into a cold lake.

She stepped inside and inhaled the clay-smelling air.

Not the future, her "now" was literally dark.

Without the help of Lucy and her witchy skills, the room seemed even darker and more sinister.

The new employee looked around the seemingly different room.

Not much space... no light. Just a small window on the wall and another looking out into the Hall. A large table stretching from one small window to the next took up most of the room. And a lot, a lot of oppressive shelves.

The air carried the heavy clay smell of these flat monsters, looming over the non-witch with a huge wall of impossible tasks.

There's... no air, really! Panic! Run outside, we're going to die here!

Dizzy again, Amelia collapsed impotently into a familiar chair, fortunately standing in the same place. It was her only ally in her fight against a mountain of information that was about to bury her.

A nightmare?! It's a nightmare again...

The Kantinian unconsciously used her farmer's mind tool and pinched her ear a little... Not a little.

Ouch. No. It's real... More than real!

Er... Panic?

"Stop panicking yourself. It doesn't help."

If you say so... But how?!

"Panic comes last in a list. It's a normal work situation. We should ask the boss to bring some lights".

Exactly! Why didn't he do it when he opened the Archive?!

"He forgot."

That's... a mockery!

"No. Don't overthink it. Just ask him for help."

Right... No. Not now. I've had enough of getting humiliated. For now. I don't want to talk to anyone... I really need to calm down. Wait... I know! We need a break. To have more time for acceptance.

The secretary looked around her tiny office, glancing hopefully through the small window at the coffee table.

No one. No one was there. Even Milo was gone.

She looked away from the saving light of the window in disappointment and plunged back into the darkness of her current existence.

"Remember. You don't want to go back to your

hometown. That's why we're here. You chose it."

I don't want to be there either... It's so scary. Don't want to be...anywhere now. It's too much... But you're right, though. Coming here was not my idea... but staying here is mine.

Amelia wiped the cold sweat from her face and neck.

Daring to stand up and exhale, she decided to approach her huge clay opponent before reporting the unacceptable working conditions to the Chief.

By the way, her eyesight had adapted, and she knew she'd be able to see better in the dark. This is especially true when her eyes have adjusted to the environment and the panic has subsided a little and given way to a certain curiosity. What do the labels say?

"Dispute between Illa and Ehi", "Missing things in Aiko's forestry", "Investigation of the place in the Forest where Unknown was found", "Dahlia's loss".

Hmm. Strange records... Now that's more interesting.

Aiko should panic, not Ami, when such things happen in the domains under his control.

Amelia quickly pulled out a tablet.

It turned out to be not one, but a pile of thin witchgraphs... from a small piece of... cloth(?)... Not sure... with strange symbols on it...

...Interesting...

It's almost impossible, but... she thinks... she's seen similar ones. But where?

Amelia strained her memory.

...Her mother's notes?.. Perhaps...

...there's a notation. "The evidence is in Milo's vault." Aha...

The Chief gets all the tasty things. It is fine…

Ami admired the signs with an intense curiosity lurking all the fears.

…What marvellous lines and squiggles....

- Lucy! - came from the open window.

"AAAAAH!"

Ami jumped up, almost dropping the fragile tablet on the floor.

The panic! It came back again and even tripled the value.

Oh!.. That was… really unexpected!

But Lucy… isn't even here. We're occupying her cubicle. And we're rummaging through official materials! How

embarrassing…

Should we… hide?

No. We've already been seen. Let's pretend it's meant to be like that. Act naturally. Be confident.

- Lucy's… not here... - Ami said in a dumb, uncertain tone, struggling with a dry throat.

"You are "Lucy now". You can't hide from it."

Oh. Riiiight!.. What a… terrible discovery.

- …I'm in her place. - the Kantinian added unwillingly in a completely slumped voice.

- Oh, sorry! Yes. - realised someone on the other side. - Milo told me. What's your name?

- Am…elia. - mumbled hoarsely the Archivist began to come round.

"Why all this officialism and our full name?"

Hate it too. I'm scared. It doesn't matter.

- I'm Rayleen. - A visitor introduced herself, a striking blonde, as far as the window allowed one to see from the darkness into the light of the Hall. - I need my latest files updated.

The Archivist squinted. It was difficult to see from the dark room into the more or less bright Hall. Anyway, Amelia didn't remember this face... because... she was extremely bad at remembering faces in general.

Rayleen... right?

The one who came looked so bright and great from this angle... What's she doing here? With such a distinguished appearance, a well-pitched voice and a strong-willed manner, she could work in Omill's Chief Crew. Or even in the Monarchical Court of Prime...

"She's looking for files she needs to do her job."

But how are we going to find anything? There's an endless Ocean of reports and everything!

"It's just a bunch of shelves. It's an Archive. There was a human being who worked here before. We can do it too".

Maybe.

- Recent... files. - Ami repeated stupidly, then shook her head decisively. - Look... I don't really know... the contents of my domains here. If you can name their list, I'll try to find them. And even after that... I have no idea where they are, especially in this clay Aeon. It will take some time... Sorry about that.

Rayleen hummed.

- Alright... Try searching for "Strange loud noise in the

Forest". It's not the only one. Give me all the ones you find and I'll pick the right one. Although... you know. I'll help you and myself. Just give me a compilation of the latest. I'll take what I need.

- Thanks…

I guess. I'm not sure anything in the world can help me now. But thanks.

...How to find it... Where to look?

...Panic?

An extremely unpleasant cold sweat returned. Not for the last time in this workplace, it seems. Ami has to do the laundry afterwards. But she doesn't know where and how to do it in this city...

Why is Everything so complicated?!

"Because there are a lot of difficulties. First things first. Find the damn report".

Yessss… Trying... No! Not trying! I can't! I can't concentrate! Just walking around in circles here... It brings on more panic!

"Do. Do something."

I'm doing it!

"Panicking again doesn't count."

…Flip you…

The Kantinian walked slowly, as if in a nightmare, towards the wall of tablets that went up into the darkness. And now her eyes darkened and she felt dizzy....

…Flip it all… Bring the gnats every piece of dung from their swamps here…

She rested her hand on the edge of the table and closed her eyes. Red spots flickered and faded under the closed lids. Blood rushed to her cheeks.

...Everything is out of control. It's over...

"Think, Ami... think."

"The last cases must be close. You don't need to check all the plates here."

"Lucille said something about there being a system in the arrangement of the boards."

The newer ones... are lower, the older ones are higher... like trees... But... a roundel of swamp dwellers... Where could the case be in the huge lower part of this "tree"?!

"We need more time".

Definitely... More time to panic, swear and accept.

The new Secretary opened her eyes in a flash.

- I... I can't find anything. - She admitted hoarsely. -

Not even the latest cases. What... other cases would you need? I'll try to memorise... No. I'll write them down and try to find them. I have to find out where and what is here anyway. But now I've no idea, really.

- So. "Noises in the Forest", as I said. And “The Warehouses. A missing sack of ilpa".

- A sack of ilpa! - the Kantinian scoffed nervously. - Swamp dwellers... Who cares about a whole sack of this cheap silt?

It was a relief to hear something familiar. Something that reminded her of the experience she was trying to escape was now refreshing and even encouraging. Things she hadn't mastered back home.

- Well. We'll try to find out. - Rayleen shook her head. - It probably fell off a self-propelled vehicle and they didn't notice... It's not within the Station's jurisdiction. But Milo has promised to help them.

- Interesting...

The captured operative found the courage to approach the void of frightening amounts of information.

Searching. Not panicking. Look for "warehouses". The latest ones. Do it.

...Wow!! You won't believe it! There's one... about a sack!

The Archive newcomer was all about screaming and jumping. She’s insane! She's doing it! She's a monster! Her first find!

Not the missing sack itself, of course, but at least something within the limits of her new profession... it's a good start.

It doesn't feel so bleak and hopeless here anymore, although it's still a weird job. The wall of tablets wasn't so invincible, though it's still tough. There's something to be found in this clutterflip.

"The emerging roots of the joy of being a clay digger, what do they call it here?"

Oh, shut up... Don't spoil the moment of triumph.

"Look. It has a little green label in a hole."

Yes! So small, almost invisible... Especially in the dark. We have to visit a boss... if they'll give us a break!

- Well, here! - Puffing contentedly, the Archivist hurriedly pushed the tablet through the drop window. - I found the sack! Uh... Information about the sack, I mean... Is this it?

The officer took the trophy from Amelia's trembling hands and examined the documents carefully.

- Yes, that's it. - Rayleen nodded.

So patient! But there's more to find... Damn swamps...

"It should be somewhere near the empty space from the document we just retrieved, supposedly... These are the last cases."

"Look at the labels. Rayleen said it was her case."

The bag... Did we find it here? Or there? I don't remember... The Forest, the Forest... Or... Noise, noise... There's nothing even close...

The rookie quickly scanned the labels again. They began to blur treacherously before her eyes. Stop it.

"Hey. Look! I think I've noticed something... Look there. A label. "Rayleen's". You missed it last time."

What? Missed what? Everything's so stressful, like a nightmare... Ah, yes! Grabbing. Trying not to smash this tablet... Here we go.

- I'm... Not sure about this. Is this it? - Amelia held out the document with a hopeful question.

- That's it. - the Station officer confirmed shortly.

The Lumins bless you! You see? It's not that scary and hopeless. Well, scary, but not hopeless.

- And what... was that noise?

Encouraged, Ami suddenly became curious.

- Some rumbling in the night... Like the others in various parts of the Forest. We found nothing suspicious in the direction the locals had pointed out.

Raelyn seemed to have made some indefinable gesture that manifested itself in the dark room as an eerie shadow running across the shelves.

An odd effect.

- Interesting... And what... part of the Forest were you looking at?

"Leave her alone, chatterbox. You can read the reports yourself."

It's... quicker to ask. I'm trying to buy time and distract her.

- In the part closest to the city. And in the farthest parts too. Everywhere.

- And?

- There was nothing. And nothing again. The Forest is full of nothing that stands out. But Milo is still inconsolable, hoping to find something.

The servicewoman snorted slightly irritatedly, but it seemed she was in no mood for jokes. Raeleen sounded more puzzled than annoyed. And there was also fear and fatigue. Something that had happened lately was definitely bothering her. It was the same intonation in Milo's voice. Something frightening and disturbing to him. And infuriating for Finnian.

- Interesting... - Amelia repeated, making another attempt to find the other documents.

But it was as fruitless as "the noisy business" of this Station. The labels were small. The letters on them were indistinct in the dark and due to Ami's panic.

The amount of which Rayleen had suddenly decided to increase.

- Ooh! I remembered something! There's something else I need... Look for “a missing book from the Witchery Archives”. I also need this case while Faella is busy.

- Oh dear... Someone really likes to read, don't they? - Amelia tried to sound nonchalant as she broke into another cold sweat.

- It's unlikely to be given to anyone. Except trainees and those with clearance. But there was no record of anyone taking it.

- Interesting... - the word stuck in our frightened Secretary's mind.

And Rayleen doesn't seem to mind chatting either... Good. Despite the huge, awkward pauses as Ami tries to find the document and the right words to say.

But... This is really interesting!

...What kind of book was it? She wants to read the Witchium book too. Someone is so lucky! All of Witchium is lucky. And a thief. We at least need to know what the book was about. But there's another problem.

There's no tablet around the empty spaces of the newly retrieved cases... Even after examining this empty space for thirty times.

No, there's no hope. These cold, unforgiving mountains of clay would bury them here.

- Ah... Which cycle was it?

Final attempt.

- Not sure... It's not my case, it's Faella and Talla's. Hm... I don't remember. I don't know what date it is. We didn't even notice it was missing when Finnian complained. Well, they read it out, it'll be returned. And nobody knows exactly when the book went missing. So messed up.

Oh great… Find no one knows what somewhere you wouldn’t find ever.

Ami continued to frantically rummage through all the shelves along the shelf. This depressingly hypnotic activity had already reduced the panic somewhat, but still increased the dizziness.

"You know she can't wait forever. Say something... what a mature woman like you would say in this case. Admit the obvious."

Right...

Luckily, from the bright hallway in the darkness of the room, Rayleen didn't notice Ami blushing.

- So... This is going to take a while... As I said. Thank you for your patience and your insights into the cases. I can't find anything now.

- Don't beat yourself up.

If only she could. Despite the fact that no one is beating her from the outside now, she's already internalised this pattern of behaviour from her homeland, where a dozen or two venomous comments about her intellectual abilities and her functionality in general will be commonplace in this case. Even though she had never worked as a Secretary before. Mistakes were absolutely unacceptable, everyone in Kantene was supposed to be perfect from the start of their careers and lives.

But no one was, and it didn't help anyone to beat themselves into powerlessness and ruin their beginnings.

And the inner fire of unbearable shame, burning like that, spread further. Ami blushed even more, as if it were possible. Blood pulsed in her ears and at the back of her neck.

This impeccably elegant and condescending Omillian had sympathised with her. And there was absolutely nothing Ami could do in return. Not even to make her work easier or faster. In fact, she was an obstacle. For everyone and since her birth.

- First of all, you're here for the first light. - Rayleen brought her out of her dark stupor. - Secondly, some tablets may have already been taken. Look at Lucy's journal.

- That's probably what happened... - Ami agreed quietly. - I can’t find the journal here either... It's so dark here... I have to find Milo first. He must enlighten me about a lot of things here.

"This is no excuse for your incompetence."

- Oh, I had a vague feeling that something was wrong

here, but I couldn't put my finger on it! Now I see. Why aren't you?.. - the Omillian sounded confused. - Oh! You just can't. Because you're a non-witch.

- Yesss.

- What kind of performance do you expect then? Well... Solve your initial problems, then we can talk. I think I'll change my plans and go to the Warehouse first. Good luck...

- Wait! You've been so patient, I'm so grateful... I would like to do something in return. Let me bring the documents when I find them.

"What are you doing?!"

- Alright. - agreed the officer.

- Great. Do you need anything else? I'm searching, and I'm already buried by these tons of clay, a few more documents won't be a critical amount for my grave.

“We’re doomed now.”

Rayleen laughed.

- Hmm... If you're sure. I'll need copies of the latest reports on the cured. All of them.

- Accepted.

“Write it down quickly! Or you'll be embarrassed twice."

More than twice.

Amelia rushed to her bag and began another search for writing utensils, hearing footsteps in the Hall out of the corner of her ear. She heard the truthful officer cross the room with a firm, unhurried stride and walk away. Leaving Amelia once more alone in the dark.

The Kantinian's gaze fell on a faint ray of light falling from a small window into a large, bright, interesting world outside... Her bag, unlike the shelves, can be moved closer to the window. And it will help her to find everything she needs there. If we're able to find anything at all here.

"You will. We've already found something. But it will be a lot easier if we find Milo first."

Right. I hope for some ease. We need some dopamine.Finding Milo will be a crucial achievement that will bring the other achievements in our way.

...Finian's book... the cured... the... noise? Have we found the noisy plate for them? Doesn't matter... We'll write it down when we find a damned stick...

The stick and the juice of the writing berries were there, a little dried up, but it was quite possible to crack it open and write something. The main thing was not to forget

what you wanted to write while you were looking for it.

...Swamp squelches! We will find the documents. We might. But where would we find Rayleen?!

"On a second level."

But how will we know the difference?! We couldn't get a look at her face through the blindingly bright window in this hurry... What if there are many graceful blondes here?!

...a book, cured, a noise? Noise too... or not? Just write it down with a question mark...

- Lucy. - came from the window.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Ami was scared again. But now she realised who they were talking to. And that hiding was useless.

- I'm... here instead. - Amelia replied in a shaking, nervous voice.

- Oh. You're not Lucy! - Someone outside had made a great discovery.

Splendid.

- That's right. - I agreed hoarsely. - But what am I supposed to be looking for? Let me finish writing down the previous cases I haven't found.

- Oh. You... didn't?

- No. - Ami confessed. - All I can do now is add to my list of failures. I am sorry. What shall I add?

- A list of items missing from Finnian's vault. - The other side reacted with embarrassment and sympathy.

Add... Horror, horror, horror, horror! One more person to fail!

"Easy. Even easier."

- They were just asked… by Rayleen... And we haven't found them. I was about to start to look for Lucy's journal instead. But it’s also hopeless.

- Look. Talla might actually have the cases by now. I'll look for them.

- Oh, thank you so much!

- So. You ended up working here. I'm Davin, by the way. In case you don't remember.

As if to underline his words, the dark-haired, bearded truth officer rested his chin on the window visor, showing his face.

Ami was slightly taken aback by the approaching, menacing talking head that had suddenly appeared in the room, blocking out almost all the meagre remnants of light from the Hall.

- I... remember you! I destroyed your coffee. Good to see you. I'm also glad you need something I already couldn't find, not something new... Because as the number of things on my list increases, my panic level increases disproportionately.

- Don't! - the service man smiled. - You don't know anything about the place, your language is foreign. It's hard to adapt to working in a foreign department where everything is organised very differently from what you're used to. Don't be too hard on yourself.

“He’s so niiiice!”

- Yes, yes, yes! So true... And working outside my profession brings problems.

"Just because he's nice doesn't mean he's interested in our complaints. Who's easy these lights?"

- You were a courier.

- I was also an operative.

- An operative? - the Templar was taken aback. - What a surprise. Our Lucy is now going to separate drunk people fighting with garden tools and look for traces of trampled fields?

He shook his shadowy head disapprovingly.

- More like counting sacks of orgama and getting a lot of blame because he can't tell the difference between that and ishitsa... If they put her in my place. The Kantine is a quiet place, you know. Sometimes too much. When I joined, I wanted chases, investigations and high-profile cases... Like the VST. But there was none of that. Most of the time. There was one unprecedented incident... but it kind of melted away quickly.

- Omill was pretty quiet too, you know... Until recently. It's so hectic now. And it feels like we are dealing with VST level stuff... None of us understand it. I don't envy those VST people. Personally, the level of stress I have here every light is enough for me.

- I think I'd rather have VST privileges than be here where my stress level is off the charts for nothing. The fights and chases I've had during my service couldn't have freaked me out as much as this little room with its seemingly endless amount of clay, where you desperately need to find something in the midst of this Aeonness. Sounds like the stuff of nightmares. PTSD guaranteed.

- Ask for time off for treatment afterwards.

- If I survive. Do you need anything else apart from what you have kindly decided to find for me?

- Yes. Find me the correspondence with Prime Royal Laboratories from the cycle before last. I need the blood test results.

- Oh, that's a real horror... I'll write it down...

Oh, no, the inkwell, don't fall! We don't need the black juice on the floor, we need it on our cloth. Damn darkness...

Ami went back to the shelves.

"Cycle before... You need to look higher up. And look for references to Prime on the labels."

Now you're helping, aren't you?... Labels... Prime, Labs... Labs, Prime.

"Closer to the entrance are the reports, further from the curtain are the cases, in the middle are the correspondence..."

Thank you, prompting boggarts... Can you always be so cooperative?

Talking to friendly people really helps to work and feel better. Finding something to do without a panicky throat and blood pounding in your ears is much easier. Still hard though...

...Prime... Here. The dispatches from Prime...

"Look. It's here. Here."

Fascinating... It really starts to work when it's quiet inside for a moment, doesn't it? Let's have a look...

She held the found tablet up to the light of the Hall window.

- This one?

- Yes, thank you.

- Splendid...

The Secretary smiled weakly as she wiped her sweaty palms on the clothes.

- It will be alright. You'll see. - Davin winked encouragingly and headed for the second level.

- I really hope so!

Ami sat back in her chair.

"So. We won again?"

There's more to come, but yes. For now. There will be no end to them. And it will be forever.

"Half of the cycle."

She glanced at the plate that had recently caught her eye. They definitely should find a time to examine it before the nightmare is over.

"She would learn to work here and lose her operational skills at the same time. To settle down, unmoving in Kantine, just like her mother."

No!

Amelia may be somewhat immobile now, but at least she's frozen in a new place. In a new pose, so to speak. How comfortable it is is another question. You have to make the best of it, one way or another.

"Right. We've got treats."

Treats! That's much better. We should eat right away.

Ami stood up, dug into her bag and pulled out some flatbread. She took a big bite and started to chew.

Mmm. That's the taste... It's not a good idea to nibble on problems in a hurry, but... there's no other tranquilliser at hand. So delicious. It's a kind of biscuit miracle...

Where had we seen the strange tablet we had almost dropped?

"Strange signs on found scraps". Here it is. It was not difficult to find it. It always happened when she was interested in the results.

The Archivist quickly went to a small outer window and lifted the translucent document to eye level to see if she could see through it.

They were witch-burned recordings of evidence found during the search. Ami didn't know what the location was marked with.

She took a closer look at the signs, turning the tablet slightly. Voluminous witchgraphs themselves had always fascinated her, not to mention images of some strange alien writing... So alien and so... familiar.

Hmm. I'll have to check mother's notes.

"Shall we look for a missing Finnian's stuff?"

Davin promised to find it.

"And if he won't?"

One moment... Let's have another spicy flatbread while we investigate. We're on a break.

“Oh, lovely.”

What are these signs… are so curious. So beautiful. Where had she seen them before? It wasn't just the notes. There was something else... Something... from her childhood. Strange feelings. Strange feelings. But what exactly?

What are they? Do they glow by themselves? Like ones with a little halos?

The Secretary turned the plate a little more in her hands. What an effect. It's probably just a Suns glow. It's hard to tell when you're standing with the transparent thingy against the window.

Ami stepped away and put the tablet on the desk, on top of the issues log. It's great to be in touch with something curious and with the light again.

The windows here are so small. Just like a room itself. It's not clear if it's for the safety of the documents or just to annoy someone who works here.

She sat down, pulled the tablet closer and hovered over it for a moment. But the markings were no longer visible against the dark background. The illumination was also a temporary effect.

An unpleasant chill was another temporary effect observed here, but it became a frequent guest. And now it was running down her neck and making the hair on her arms stand up.

Instinctively, the Kantinian quickly checked her palm and neck. No, nothing stuck to her skin. Just nerves. Stress.

Amelia sprang to her feet. She should go out for some air.

"And for some Milo for some light."

She went to the door curtain, but stopped suddenly to listen. Something wasn't right... The Templar had only noticed how quiet the hall had been for the last few moments... Abnormally, unnaturally quiet.

Only some soft whispering and pomping of her heart could be heard. That... must have been the way the conversation going on outside was heard here.

...Something's not right here anyway.

A shiver ran down her neck and down her legs again, making Ami jump out hastily.

A dense and bright reality descended upon her, slightly deafening and blinding her for a while. This was despite the fact that the Hallway was the usual semi-darkness. There was no sound like that a whisper. And no people. There was no one.

...Enough of that.

The service woman walked quickly through the Hallway, feeling her fears diminish with each step. Milo had asked her not to leave the Archives for too long. Well, she wouldn't be for long.

Besides, if she stood near the door, she could watch it. And workers and strangers could easily find her. Probably. It doesn't matter. She needs to have some rest.

It's so nice here... So quiet. Cosy seats, soft lights and the smell of coffee. Can we work from here? Or at least stay

here for a while?

By the way, there are some sounds. The muffled voices of people talking in a corridor on the second level. And maybe Moki's office. The Chief's office was sealed with a privacy spell, the Archivist knew that.

She looked around and exhaled a sigh of relief.

The recent panic and fear felt so small and unimportant now. How many times had she chased them away. Countless. And she could do it again.

“Yeah. Don't make stuff up."

"We look odd enough here. We don't want to be shunned again."

"Not here. Not by all these nice people."

We will. Sooner or later. You can't fool people's instincts. People can lie, but their instincts can't. If the mental illness is contagious it has a point.

“Whispers in the dark is a fine reason to be kicked out of any service.”

And any society.

She shook her head, pushing her thoughts away at last.

Sitting in a cosy Hall was so satisfying. No darkness, no whispers, no chills. No plates. But it's extremely unproductive, like any other pleasant occupation.

Shall we get back to work?

"Yes. Why, is there any other way?"

I wish there was.

Ami sighed again, got up and walked grudgingly to her workplace.

And just in time. On her way to her cave, she spotted someone who had been standing there quietly and unnoticed for some time. Someone she had already met during a coffee break when she came down from the second level.

Donny. She thought that was his name. She gave him a nod of greeting and quickly slipped back into the dark Archives.

- Ami! I need something from you. Getting settled in here?

- A bit... Donny, right? So glad I've learned at least one name... And you're the first person who hasn't called me Lucy, by the way. Thank you. I’ll remember your name in return.

- It wouldn't have occurred to me to call you Lucy. We were introduced. - The employee was surprised. - Give me the reports on the purple market for the last cycle, please.

- I'll do my best.

Even if it's the worst by the Station standards.

Ami turned to the invincible tablet colossus to continue the battle when Donny called out to her.

- I need to return something as well. Here, take this.

The officer passed a small stack of tablets through the window. Oh.

- All right. - Ami took them with deliberate cheerfulness.

What to do with these? Well. At least we won't have to look for it.

Cheer up to become cheerful. Or mimic it if you can't.

Ami slumped back in her chair and stacked the plates on the table.

"We don't have to look for them, yes. But we have to put them back where they belong."

Right... I have no idea where they might be.

"That's the point."

- Oh... - she said aloud. - A terrible thing. I have no idea where they were. I can put them on the table and that's all.

- You can also put them on the floor. - Donny chuckled. - They are flat and everything. Ask Milo! There's a reason he wears the Chief hat around here.

- Yeah. - Amelia agreed. - I can put the tablets in his hat too... What did you say? I forgot... I should write it down, I'm so easily distracted.

- The Purple Market. - Patiently reminded the Templar. - The purple mushroom market. For the last little cycle.

- Thank you... The reports for the last minor should be... somewhere here...

"Or somewhere out there. That guy's going to be stuck at our window for Aeons."

- Donny. - she asked, fumbling desperately and without much hope on the shelves. - How do the plaques move up when they become obsolete? Does Lucy keep moving them up so that the latest ones are at the bottom? How does she get there?

"Don't get distracted, please. You'll forget what you're looking for again."

- Yes, she does, but not manually, of course. Every half cycle you have to go up one level and operate the mechanism there. But I don't think you'll have to do that. Lucy will be back before then. Or Milo will do it.

- Interesting... Yes.

Ami passed the bottom two rows and went to the third.

"It's fruitless."

- I wish I had asked Lucy about the plaque system in more detail... Just a general outline. - the Secretary added, as if apologising for her slowness.

- As I recall, one side with the reports and the other with the incidents. But I could be incorrect. I don't think there's any sorting by location... Maybe there is. I am not sure.

- Thank you... We're both clueless, but unfortunately I'm a Secretary here... Could we swap? Even for a moment?

- You want me to do your job for you? - sniggered the service man. - Of course I can.

- If it's not too much trouble.

- Not too much. I can also take your lunch and your time off later.

- Whatever you want. I'm already dead anyway. This job is lethally stressful. And local food portions are so damn small. I've been living half-starved all the time here. I'm not going to live to see my time off. I'm about to be buried under these clay killers.

Donny sighed sympathetically, came into the chamber and gave the Archivist a disapproving look.

- Ami, have you tried lighting a lamp? It would be a lot easier to find something than trying to do it in the semi-darkness. Are you sabotaging?

Donny held his palm over the lamp and it glowed softly.

- What's the point of it? - Ami shrugged. - I can't find anything with or without the light... At least I had an excuse. But actually, I can't physically light it. To be true.

- Why is that? Oh... well. - Donny has realised. - You're not a witch. I forgot.

- I'm not a Secretary either. But I'm here. In the most inappropriate workplace in the world.

- So why did you accept this job?

- The alternatives were worse. The way I saw it at the time. I had expected to encounter difficulties when I came here, but I didn't expect them to be of such quality and quantity.

By this time, the Truth Officer was already rummaging through the shelves. It was clear that he was better and more successful at it than Ami was.

How did he manage to be competent in several areas of their Station at the same time? He's not only working on

cases, he's also able to find them in this huge wall of tablets.

- Well. Cheer up, Ami. You'll make it. You're just starting out. Everything's hard at first...

Oh dear. He's really supportive... So nice.

- ...no one here will ask you to do anything supernatural. At least they didn't before... I just messed around until I learnt everything.

More encouragement than criticism... Unbelievable. Priceless.

Tears of surprise came to Ami's eyes again. Away, away, away!

"Why so bitter? Not grateful?"

Shut up.

- Th..thank you. - Ami could barely get it out. - It's so nice of you...

- Oh, here we go... I found everything! - Donny waved the suitcases triumphantly.

- Damn well done. - Ami smiled wryly, still frozen inside, still trying to hold back tears.

Donny made a mock ceremonial bow and left.

The service woman smiled and sat down heavily at the table, the clay surface of which was already wet from the tears dripping down Ami's cheeks.

What if she was a good thinker, quick to learn new things, easy to get along with, not over-dramatising everything? She'd be great at life and any job. But she isn't. She's just a deeply depressed Ami with a heavy head.

"Stop it. We'll get a headache. It's already a mess."

"Stop turning a useless thing into an impediment."

Get off, I said.

Amelia wiped away her tears and stood up quickly.

All right, they're distracted again, but they need to be distracted in a different way. Something else she needed to find. Find herself lost in the thoughts and get back to work. Then find the documents. Step by step.

The first thing to do is to organise the panicky, chaotic records of her logbook. At least the to-do list must be clear and helpful.

Lucille has a terrible job, we have to admit... It's hard to imagine anyone spending their whole working life like this. They had Archives in the Kantine and Ami never really thought about what it’s like to serve here all the time. Pure agony.

She used to think that if she had direct access to the

records, she'd be able to read the amnesia cases. But now she had no illusions. No, no and no.

There's simply no time to study for yourself here. You're always looking for something, giving something, taking something and putting it back. There is no time for research or reading... but the very thought of it is interesting.

Working for her own curiosity will be a nice relief and a good reward for all she has to go through here.

There was a faint murmur from the other side of the window. Ami perked up.

- Milo said we have a new girl. We haven't been introduced. - A playful, ingratiating woman's voice rang out. - I'm Faella. What do I call you again?

Ami jumped involuntarily, snapped out of her thoughts and took a quick look at the visitor. The lamp that Donny had lit illuminated the face of the Selva as she gazed into the room with interest.

Beautiful, with lovely dark skin and straight, shiny black hair, but not as aloof and seemingly indifferent to almost everyone and everything as all the Selvas Ami had met.

- Lucy. - Surprised, Ami unexpectedly introduced herself by the former Secretary's name. - Sorry. I almost believe it. Everyone here calls me that. It's only my inability to make sense or order in this clay chaos that brings me back to reality. I'm Ami.

- Hello, Ami-Lucy! - She smiled sweetly. - Don’t hurry things, it will be fine.

Why were strangers always telling her what she should tell herself? And how could they not have the shame to be so nice that it made her weep uncontrollably again.

"Grateful. Not weeping."

- Thank you! And... What's the occasion for me to demonstrate my powerlessness again? - Ami smiled wryly.

- The data on the recent disappearances of... people. Yes. We're dealing with humans now. I think the paperwork and shipments are already being handled by the others.

- Uh-huh... Yes... I've been asked a lot today...

The Archivist turned away from the window and returned to the depths of her lair and despair.

- Waaaaaah... - she sobbed loudly. - I have no idea where to find this... Sorry for being such a slowpoke.

"You didn't try! Since it's the last suitcase, it's downstairs."

"Do it. Nice and easy."

It's not nice and easy at all. There's so many of these cases! Lucy will come back and find them before we do. It's hopeless.

"Maybe it is. Then let's add it to the list of problems."

The tired rookie turned back to the window.

- Can't find it. Sorry about that. I'll add it to my list. And I'll bring it to you later. Is that all right? So you don't have to stand there.

- All right. I'm on level two, at the end of the corridor. - the Templar agreed cheerfully. - Take my old cases as well. And take a look at the Finnian witch survey. Will you?

Ami took a few plates and placed them thoughtfully in a growing pile on the table.

Everyone's getting interested in this Finnian case. It seems that his fiery speech was impressive and had a lot of success here.

- Mm-hmm. I promised it to someone... Rayleen, I think, and I can't remember with my to-do list...

- You can ask her on the way. Rayleen is also on the second floor, in the middle of the corridor.

- Thank you.

I will... As soon as I know exactly what Rayleen looks like. And how many blondes there are in the Station, and whether they all look stunning. And sometimes they are stunning in the literal sense of the word.

Ami heard the soft footsteps of Selva moving gracefully away.

What was her name? We certainly wouldn't be able to separate this Selva from the other beautiful women of her nation. They all looked equally marvellous with their smooth dark skin and shining black hair. Not telling that all humans are equally non-memorable.

"We will ask. Yes, it will be awkward, but it's not the first time, right?"

Right. Never mind. There's no time for anthropological research now. The important thing is to write down the last task quickly.

...Swamp bastards, what am I supposed to write it on?! This cloth is full.

Ami stood up and walked over to her bag and rummaged through it, hoping to find at least a small piece of writing tissue - she should have had some with her.

Having found a cloth, Ami sat down at the table and

opened a can of juice to write again. What kind of swamp bites did Selva want there...?

Everything had already slipped the mind.

The last thought was that everyone was concerned with... Finnian's business. Yes. It's not about him now... It's not about the book either. It's something else. Writing it down as it is. Maybe we'll remember it later.

"Rather not."

Don't increase the panic. There was something else. What's the first thing?

Ami looked around.

Donny's lit lamp mercilessly outlined the ever-increasing volume of problems. There's such a mess of these plates… They're lying on the table and near it being pulled off the shelf indiscriminately.

"Oh, come on. Focus. Try to remember. What else?"

Something about the Temple Witches. What could have happened there? Did anyone get hurt or anything go missing again?

Yes. An apprentice from the Chief Witch's department was injured. That's what he said. But that's not our case.

Missing... Yes, something or someone is missing. Not Finnian's stuff this time. Or not just Finnian's... The latest missing persons report. Missing... Yes! Missing persons.

"Write it down quickly."

Writing. There was something else.

"Later."

Yes. Let's do this search. People are missing everywhere on the Continent by the way. Got lost or died in the woods. Went off in search of a new life. Without telling anyone.

Ami herself was once involved in finding a woman who'd taken an heirloom to retaliate against her family. And the fugitive was never found.

The VST would find her quickly. But their presence would certainly not be tolerated by Kantinian pride.

Very well. Let's search for the missing "Omill Missing Persons" file. Hopefully this search will have better results.

"Missing part of a shipment from Lima"... "Missing package of building clay". "Missing persons from customs". Persons? Yes. Four of them, in fact. Creepy.

They're "missing" a lot here. It will be difficult to find the exact one.

There was a rustle outside the window, which Ami's brain quickly labelled as unwelcome.

- Lucy. Could you get me a... - another extremely undesirable sound was heard.

- No! - the secretary growled, still searching the shelves.

"Oops. That was rude."

It was rude indeed, yes.

There was a tense moment of silence. The busy service woman turned quickly to the window and hurriedly approached to see who had caused her unintentional anger.

It was... the Selvian man Milo had introduced her to earlier.

- Sorry. - She added guiltily, looking at the surprised Templar. - I really can't! I've got a bunch of stuff to find and I'm already overloaded. Missing files on missing people. And stuff like that.

- Well then... - The truthful one frowned. - Should I... come back later?

- Yes, please... Oh no! Wait. Let me add a task to my list and bring what you need to the office.

- The latest inventory of the Main Warehouse.

- Very good.

She's lying, there's very little good in it.

Not intending to repeat her mistakes, Ami immediately slumped back in her chair, opened the can of juice, armed herself with a writing stick and began to slowly and carefully scribble her last task on the cloth.

"...and may the ghouls take it all away," she added calligraphically at the end of the list, maintaining an outwardly impassive stare.

Her reserves of anger and panic were running low. There was no point in all this. She wouldn't last long here anyway.

She herself wouldn't last long in this mode, even if these wonderful people maintained their patience and benevolence for a few more lights.

Amelia drew a ritual mound with a twig at the end of the entry and was about to resume searching for the requested documents when her eyes fell back on the witchcraft signs she'd found at the beginning of this annoying light.

She should redraw them and look for similar ones in her mother's notes and elsewhere. While she is here. Or maybe she can even... visit the big local Archives. Like the Witch ones.

The truthful ones had probably been there, looking for

similar information. And under the mountain of tablets behind her back there was probably a detailed report of the work done to study it. But it will take an Aeon to find anything here if you don't know where and what you're looking for.

And Ami can't even find what she needs to do her job.

...Blow it all into the Ocean and eat it there by the Maras…

But if her time here is short, she should make what she can of what she have. And to do the best she can with the best she has. There's nothing else to do.

The Secretary sighed resignedly and returned to her deadly epic quest.

Light 9. And the nightmare goes on.

After an eternity of panic and despair, Ami, numb to the point of indifference, finally walked toward Milo's office, clutching a pile of cases she'd managed to gather.
She owed these small victories to the friendly locals whose kindness had been a lightsource in her darkness, a fragile encouragement.
It wasn't enough to erase the stress of failing her new duties, but it was more than nothing.

Those people had been kind to her. She needed to apologise to those she'd already failed, at least. To find those fortunate enough to have documents processed by her in this dim light. And to meet the new faces she'd inevitably disappoint soon.

The thought terrified her. It felt like facing a hostile crowd—a sea of disdainful, unfamiliar faces she couldn't even memorise. Yet somehow, it hadn't been that bad.

The Secretary paused at the boss's curtained entrance, frozen. Another obstacle.
As a Kantinian outsider, she had no idea how to handle a witch-sealed doorway.

Knocking on… the wall? Like usual?

Pointless. At least not with her fist.

The protective clay-reinforced walls were thick for security. The curtains served the same purpose, barring unwanted visitors while absorbing smells, sounds—and who knew what else? She was, after all, a non-witch outsider here.

But one thing she knew from her past visits was that one shouldn't underestimate or be too unceremonious with

those witch blankets. One of them had thrown her a decent distance away then, disturbing everyone in the vicinity. Everyone has to remember how to enter the sealed room properly, no matter their origins.

She made some kind of an uncertain silly gesture over the top of the curtains, clasping her eyes and inwardly preparing to be violently thrown across the room once more.

One could never be prepared for something like this.

She gently touched the entry blanket, closing her eyes with fear.

Nothing terrible happened next.

The entrance fabric rippled slightly, gently returning to her hand only the sensation of air resistance.

That was it? Is that an ask-for-permission sign? Or… is it not?

She must have swung her hand the wrong way. Ami ran her palm over the surface of the fabric again. It rippled again. No effect.

It's so… stupid! Everything is so stupid here!!! She, first of all. She is stupid! In many, many…

Milo's curly head appeared from behind the curtain.

…ways.

- Who's so modest and intrusive? - Boss addressed the question to the void of the hall, shaking his head irritably, because Ami instinctively jumped aside to avoid the collision.

- Us. Tablets with legs. - she croaked, voice frayed. - Milo... I really need help.

His expression softened.

- I can see that. You look… very confused. What's wrong?

- Everything. But… One thing at a time. First things first. - Amelia quietly started, ignoring the teasing. - There was no light. I can't do it myself. Could you light it every time you unseal the room?

- Why didn't you… Oh. I see. You just can't.

Ami's disapproving glare confirmed it. Milo let out an irritated breath.

- Look. I'm busy. I can't keep everything in mind. But I will. Starting tomorrow. If I remember.

"Veeery promising."

Better than nothing. Ami was not feeling funny at all. Quite the opposite. It came dangerously near to breaking down.

- Correct… - She then made an effort to prevent

panicking by shifting to step-by-step instructions. - Everyone is returning tablets to me, but I'm not sure where to put them…

- Well…

- …and. I've collected what I've requested for the last half of the light, but I don't know who to give it to.

- But you…

- …can't remember faces. - reminded the Archivist.

- I see... - drawled the Station Chief. - Come on, then. I'll do what I should have done from the start: show the Station.

- With all of the highlights? - Amelia grinned incredulously.

- No. Your access does not extend to every area here. So we'll stick to the key ones.

- I'm fine with it. It's more than none.

Omillian extended an inviting gesture, signifying the beginning of the tour.

- Most of the offices are on the second level. Moki and I sit downstairs.

- The most down-to-ground individuals.

- Including you.

- Yeah. This part of the documents are for Moki. I don't think he'll be pleased to see us.

- Why?

- As many times as I've seen him, he doesn't look pleased.

Milo chuckled sarcastically.

- Outstanding observation. He never feels content with anyone. However, he works well.

Ami sighed.

- I wish I could tell it about myself.

- Don't judge so soon. Let it ripen.

- It's rotting before it's ripe. The climate is good, but the soil isn't right. You know… I can relate to him. For him, people are just another burden. Just saying... He exhibits a limited variety of emotions. Perhaps the most common expression on his face is one of joy.

- Mmm… maybe. I'm just happy he's very good at his job. Took most of the load off me.

Milo ran his palm across the surface of the curtain of Moki's office.

It rippled a little, indicating that they may enter. The Chief did so at once, pulling a reluctant Ami along with him.

Alrighty. “Memorise them all.” The game has just started.

This one's easy. He is the darkest-skinned Selva man. Like Laivy, he is grim and dismal, but instead of growling, he speaks.

What would happen if he suddenly became a happier person? Would he still be recognised? Ami doubted.

Focus.

Violet eyes, shoulder-length hair that is somewhat short by Selva norms and typically bundled tightly.

- Moki. - began the Secretary, slightly embarrassed under the truthman's frown. - I… I found something that looks similar to your request, but I'm not sure if this is the one... Look at it.

The Selvian's countenance remained stony as he accepted the plaque.

Monumental. You could make clay statues of it. It'll be impressive.

Ami gazed fixedly at the papers in Selva's grasp.

- What did you ask for? - Milo enquired.

- A list of the Main Warehouse. - responded the officer without taking his devastatingly gloomy gaze off the document.

- Why?

- At the market, Raelyn was conversing with a smith. She laments that it's nearly impossible to purchase Dwarven Firestone these days. Their supply is nearly depleted. It indicates that we will soon run out of tools.

- That sounds really bleak.

Apparently everything sounds bleak when Moki says it.

Probably his “Don't worry, it'll get better” sounds the same as “We're doomed and we're all going to die soon.”

- Exactly. - Moki agreed. - Raelyn asks to check supplies and talk to the warehouse and caravan bosses if necessary.

- What a nice addition to our lovely smugglers.

- Yep.

Smiley Milo frowned as well now.

“Looks like it's going to rain in this room.”

- Keep me updated.

With a nod from Moki, the gloomy-cloud-mood staff members departed the office, walked through the Hall and slowly began to ascend to the next level.

- What's this trouble team he spoke about? - queried Ami.

- It's the same one that VST and I have been attempting to locate for nearly a cycle! Whoa.

He winced at this terrible knowledge.

- And. What do they do?

- Attempting—likely with success—to smuggle goods via Omill. Naturally, without registering it. Buying up… some stuff.

- Kind of weird stuff?

- Yeah. Really weird.

- What are they up to?

- I'm not sure… One can presume that it's to fabricate a shortage. In order for them to trade it in for something of more value. Although it is uncommon, it does occur occasionally… We are here for that reason. The city of Omill is a trading hub.

-And there's a lot of work now.

- It is. Here. It’s Donny and Calvin's office.

The curtain manipulation was repeated. And soon they were in the abode of the servicemen working on the second level of the building.

- Amiiii! - Donny smiled broadly. - Long time no see. Take that tablet back from me, please…

The Secretary recoiled in feigned horror.

- No, I won't! -her nasty grimace was sincere. - Donny, have mercy, I have no idea where I'm going to put it there! I’m drowning!

The officer chuckled.

- Poor Ami. Not that I'm trying to say anything… But why do you think we have Milo here?

He asked innocently and slyly squinted.

- To… show me who's who where?

- Well, he can also show you where the tablets lie. - Donny added in an amicable voice. - Assisting a new employee in adjusting to their new environment. Like a good Chiefs do.

Milo swiftly changed the subject and shook his head disapprovingly, not wanting to take part in the conversation about how to use him in ways that were not desired at the time.

- Ami. This is Calvin. - he gestured to the second truth officer present.

Calvin. Well, Calvin doesn't stand out.

It really can be an issue… Ordinary height, ordinary appearance. Except for the curtains running behind the

officer's cape. It's quite colourful. Even dapper.

Does he always act like this, or is it just this light?

What else? Nothing special again. His hair is the colour of orphan stalks, just like Milo's.

- Have you seen Reece, Calvin? - Milo enquired.

- Yes, - said the subject of Ami's examination.

- And? - Nothing.

- Nothing at all?

- Yeah. He's got nothing.

- I see… Calvin, this is Ami, the Secretary, Lucy's replacement.

The serviceman glanced at the Kantinian and made a joking comment.

- Ruler of the Archives.

- An impostor. - He was corrected by Ami. - Until the real one shows up or until I'm chased away by the people, I'll sit here.

- Your people are tablets now. They'll get over it. Let's keep moving. - Milo called out. - Next on the agenda is Raelynn and Elsu's office. You already know Elsu.

- I do.

If you ever encounter Elsu, you won't be able to forget her, she is rather hard not to remember. The brightest, the largest, the most muscular, and the lightest—lighter than the others in terms of skin and hair colour. Gorgeous blue eyes that sparkle.

So magnificent.

She might be used by artists as a dashing representation of Xeva the Clayhands. Canonically, however, Xeva was portrayed as a brunette.

When they entered her office, the amazing blonde who appeared to be from the era of legends standing at the desk nodded amiably.

- Milo! - the stunning hulk said, turning to face the boss. - I'll go about my business while I have little work to do, so don't lose me this light.

- Alrighty, Elsu. - he smiled.

He directed Ami's gaze to the second amazing blonde, who was examining a document with a stern, focused gaze.

What a location. So far, there are two amazing blondes.

Fortunately for Ami, this one was not mistaken for Elsu; she was subtle and, thus far, the most beautiful blonde Ami has ever seen. Ami's initial impression from her partially darkened cave was flawless.

- Rayleen. - the Archivist began with a guilty tone. - I've been inundated with requests, and I don't remember exactly what you were looking for…

- …Finnian’s losses.

- Quite! - Ami gave herself a forehead slap. - How could I forget something like that!

- There’s too much for you.

- Yes, yes, but everyone's looking for these this light.

- Not only this light. Finnian has a dramatically efficient methods of drawing attention to the problems of the Witch community. - Rayleen grinned wryly. - And turning it into a common problem. But it's not yours anymore. I've already located tablets.

- Really?! Happy to hear it.

- Yeah, Davin gave me a hint, and it was on Talla's desk indeed.

- Ahh. Good. - Ami breathed a sigh of relief. - I won't have to go through the whole Archive again. I already got nauseous several nauseas during it. Milo. Shall we move on?

The Station Chief agreed and they headed towards the semi-dark corridor under a brown clay ceiling, which was a passageway to the next room.

- This is where Irji and Kimi dwell. - Milo commented. - Kimi is busy in the city right now.

Kimi. The darkest-skinned Selva ever seen by Ami, not just in this Station, but ever, small in stature, the same height as Ami herself. You don’t see such miniatureness often.

This officer is easy to remember, as is Elsu. These two were, come to think of it, opposites in height, hair and skin colour, and personality.

Phlegmatically slow Elsu and fussy cheerful Kimi.

Good news. The fact that they are so unique and genuine here helps those who have trouble remembering faces. Given that Ami had not encountered many different kinds throughout her life, she additionally has a strong cognitive interest.

And Irji?..

- Irji, this is Ami. The one sent from Kantine and taking Lucy's place now.

- Taking a place is a key word. It sounds almost rude.

Tall, densely built, red-haired truthful one, who sprawled in a relaxed pose on a chair, laughed. The only one with that hair colour here.

Unless you counted Ami herself. But she certainly

wouldn't mistake herself for Irji.

- Ami. Stop it. - the boss abruptly and irritably interrupted Ami.

- Sorry. Redheads shall… prevail? - she greeted the colleague.

- Yes! Everyone else will sing and dance for us soon. - willingly agreed Irji.

- It's unfortunate that neither my arrangement nor our coalition will endure for very long. I'm here for the half-cycle.

- Well, better than nothing.

- So true!

- How do you like it here? - The truthful one raised his eyebrows questioningly.

- It's still a little creepy. - Ami admitted. - But it's fine.

- Yes, these are troubled times. But living means troubles in general.

- Right, for me, it's less about the times and more about life in my case. I knew that working with documents would be so mentally undermining. And so it is.

- Don't give up. Take your mind off it more often, go out, go for a coffee.

- Great advice. Coffee's the best remedy for anything.

- Absolutely. You sound like a real Omillian. After all, you're in Omill. And you're in Omill after all. Don't waste your time.

- I won't. I swear.

He smiled encouragingly.

- We'll all be down to the coffee pot soon. Come and join us.

- I will!

Awww. This inner warmth! Long-forgotten feelings, bringing the tears close to her eyes.

Ami nodded quickly and rushed out of the room, nearly oblivious to the curtain threat. Fortunately, it has a protected exterior side. Hi there, dim hallway. I'm greeting you again and glad to be here, because you're the best place to hide my pain.

It's odd that positive emotions may sometimes cause suffering. It's strange that communication, whether it be evil or good, hurts.

Amelia quickly and discreetly wiped away a tear as she rushed to the final three offices on the floor. The final two offices. The third door was marked "Archive". Apparently, this was a technical room, the one containing some

incomprehensible mechanism that allowed documents with later dates to be transported higher.

- There are two doors, but you can go in either one, - Milo explained. - This is one big room for Davin, Talla, Faella and Kele.

Four all at once. Oh, the nightmare goes on... So many people.

“Ami, pull yourself together. Four more to meet and four to remember, you can do it.”

Totally… Especially if one of them looks remarkably well.

Ami knew it was rude to stare at others, but once she was in the final workroom for this light, she was powerless to stop herself.

She remembers him, yeah. It’s easy. The cutest one. The harder thing would be to forget him later.

Kele, standing at the table next to the other seated Selva, graciously waved hello.

“Another dose of attention from the Selves. You can get used to it. Or even get conceited.”

It might be painful to read the negligence in the deadpan expression of almond-shaped, chrystal-green eyes. However, as was already mentioned, who was she to pay attention to?

...One dead fallen leaf in the cold forest.

“Let's not get too distracted.”

The Kantinian brought her gaze back to Selva, who looked familiar. She's definitely seen this one. This is… Faella?

I f you can’t see much of the outside world from the small window… you can’t be sure. It’s the perfect place to delve into one's dark, crumpled inner world, but it's not so perfect for studying the outer world.

- Here's the data on disappearances... and a survey of witches. - Ami began, addressing Faella.

- The ones I asked for. - came the answer from the next room. - Thank you, Ami.

Wwww… What?!

Another... Faella appeared in the opening of the interior archway.

Ami stared bewildered at the exact dark-haired counterpart, with Kele standing beside the other. She really should stop staring at Selvas like that, but… Did she lose her mind here or?..

Or.

- Twins! - The Kantinian stated the fact with relief.

- Exactly! For our benefit. - Talla smiled broadly. - Lots of fun. And it even helped us solve some non-trivial cases. Once or twice.

- And deceive the local authorities?

- Ami. There's no need for it. They are quite reasonable, you can always negotiate.

- Right. I'm still living in Kantine realities.

Ami shook her head sadly and continued.

- It's truly awesome. But it makes my already challenging case much tougher. I'm attempting to keep you all in mind. If a person doesn't have any distinguishing characteristics, I usually can't tell them apart. And you're… twins! Finding the documentation is my first issue. The second issue is if I gave them to the right person.

- It's not going to be a big deal. - Talla reassured her. - We'll sort it out amongst ourselves.

She winked at Faella, who nodded in agreement.

- Where's Davin, Faella? - Milo enquired.

Davin. Aha. The nicest person in whose coffee Ami had stewed the papers and seemingly was the oldest of the bunch. Dark eyes, long black hair, a sly smile, wisdom, maturity, and tranquillity. An iconic figure from detective fiction.

He is the only one who's not of the Omillian Natives in this room, though it's hard to say anything for sure here. Not with Ami's more book knowledge than real experience.

- He was here... And now he's not. That's all I know. - Double Selva shrugged.

- What's he doing now?

- Requested the Royal Laboratories' blood test results. - Ami snitched. - If it can be interpreted as the reason for another strange disappearance.

- These days, so many odd things are happening that nothing seems odd anymore. particularly disappearances. - Milo sighed and scratched his hat in annoyance. - But as for Davin, he wouldn't be so impolite as to add it to our workload... Come on, Ami, let's get back to work. That's all, folks. Enjoy yourself here.

- The same for you!

And the roaming couple left the double office.

- Well, you know pretty much everyone now.

- Yes. Thank you. And Milo, why must the entrances to all the offices, even temporarily empty ones, be sealed? Well,

like mine, for example.

- To make a mockery of the Kantinians.

- That's what I thought, indeed.

- In order to avoid interfering with the work. Such as stealing documents, etc.

- Is that a common occurrence here?

- Not until recently. It’s a Temple Safety Reglament. We’re just doing it. We mustn't let our guard down. Even in this mess. Or especially in this mess.

- True. It's all over the place. Can we fight it? Would you kindly assist me in locating a location for these tablets? Please-please?

With a heavy sigh, Milo gazed at Ami reproachfully and rather helplessly.

- Let's do it.

To the double relief of the social phobic and lost-in-documents Ami, they returned to their level and entered the Archive, and the tension inside her began to soothe.

- The lamp. It’s working, - Milo noticed. - And you said…

- Donny helped with it.

- Ah.

- And more of that: he found the tablets he requested by himself. He’s really good at handling the documents. And lights. I've got a feeling it would be a lot easier for him without me here.

- Well, no matter how capable Donny is, he can’t do everything at once. And this man wouldn’t agree to do even a small amount of overwork anyway.

The Chief officer started to lay out tablets unwillingly and leisurely. To Secretary’s relief, he did plenty of her job before he looked at the witch's glistening scroll with the odd symbols.

- Oh. It must be returned to my office. - He swiftly and confidently reached for the scroll.

- No! - Ami stopped him. - Don’t!..

- Why? - he raised an eyebrow in surprise.

- This is… interesting.

Ami, who had gone cold with terror, tried to think of an excuse on the spot.

- Is it?

The Chief gave the employee a half-inquisitive glance.

- Yes. - vigorously shook her red head Secretary. - By the way, can I find more information on these signs?

- Practically… Nowhere. We've tried, I assure you. Perhaps, but... within the appendix of one of Prime's reports.

- Can you find it for me? Please!

- Why do you?.. Ami. This is… Tell me. What piques your interest?

- Well… This is… interesting. As I said. That's all I can say. Due to my limited Omill vocabulary. My interest won't hurt my primary job, I swear.

Milo shrugged disapprovingly and reached for a high shelf, revealing his slim, white-skinned back as the upper draperies lifted.

"It's a top-shelf thingy. So… the request was submitted some time ago."

The asked plate ended up on Ami's desk to her total satisfaction.

The Chief snorted disapprovingly again.

Doesn't matter. Winners are not judged.

The Archivist couldn't take her admiring sight from the new materials on the case.

- Thank you! For everything.

- Ami. Don't get distracted too much. You have a duty here. Remember?

- Yesssss… I know, I know. I don't want to get back to Kantine so soon.

- Can you recall how the documents were organised? Correspondence here, reports there, cases here..

The servicewoman nodded guiltily and uncertainly.

- I tried to remember… Unsuccessfully. I'd better write it down. I still don't quite understand the nuances. Is there sorting by place of occurrence or addressee of correspondence?

- It's just document type and time. I think… If it's not, we'll never survive Lucy's return. Mind it, all the blame will be on you.

- As expected… I'll do my best to think of the excuses instead of working, since I'm inefficient anyway.

- Go on, try.

The boss's voice seemed almost menacing and belligerent.

- Don't press me, there's no real need for it. I'm interested in doing my job well, so I don't have to go back to Kantine, as I said. The price of a mistake would be too high.

- Glad to hear it. Well. I'm going to clean up my office next. But first, let's go get some coffee. I believe we deserve

some rest before the hard work starts.

"It never ended, in fact."

- Good rest never hurts.

But it did. Coffee break is really the nicest thing. Particularly when it's around friendly folks.

And it could be even better if she could do without self-blaming after this. Without all of those "Why did I say it?" and "I should have said more nice things because they are so nice," and so on.

There was a serious reason for this anxiety. If not in her life, then certainly in the last few major cycles, she had not experienced so many acts of kindness and words of encouragement. But for someone who most certainly didn't deserve it, it's an awful weight. She wasn't worthy of being notified. And the next question is how would she ever repay it?

"It doesn't matter."

Right. They will stop it once they get to know her better and realise that an embittered grump like her isn't really worthy of such treatment.

"Focus on your job."

Right. There's still some work to be done. Mysterious signs look very attractive, but Milo asked to find something for him. We shouldn't let the curious Ami take over the responsible one…

…but I'm afraid it already happened. Look, she put her primary job aside again.

"It can't be helped."

"She's already failing."

"She could try more."

"She did. Get off now. There's already too much stress. We don't need to kill her, just because she's not perfect."

Milo didn't help much, but he did some work so she would rest a little.

Oh, how she wishes she could get official authorisation to investigate and study this manuscript! It would be a dream when your passion is your work! But such a lucky fate is for better people. And she would have to do it surreptitiously and covertly.

She doesn't have much time.

Wouldn't it be easier to bring here her mother's tattered diary and compare it here without wasting time copying the document? Yes.

But life is so unpredictable, and who knows what will

happen tomorrow? Scroll can be taken by Milo. Or… someone else. Copies are always a good idea.

The Archivist put her enticing document on the top of the cloth with her “debt” records and began to copy the glowing signs that shone a little bit brighter in the light of the witch's lamp. It's beautiful... but it's still not enough illumination here!

With a grating snort, the Secretary glanced up at the little, dim window.

Lucy has a rather uncomfortable desk. How does she see what she reads and writes?

“She’s a witch. They have a better vision. And she could even burn texts without looking at them.”

Right! Curse my unlucky fate. Even with the light... It's still dark in here.

Maybe Ami doesn't have witch abilities… but she certainly has an ability to move the table closer to the window.

She has a reputation as being stubborn and is a Kantian. And no matter who you are. If you’re truly motivated to do anything, you will find a way.

So, after a while, Ami was struggling to recover her breath when the heavy clay table finally stood by the small window. It's fine. But by the time Lucy returned back, she would have the table set up. Although the desk wall nearly blocks some of the shelves, it was still preferable to being in the dark.

Alright, let’s return to our mysterious scroll. The time is short.

Curious Ami exhaled, returning to the witchcraft, not so diligently being smothered by responsible Ami, who was attacking her with pricks of conscience all light. She squinted, trying to memorise the symbols she was copying. They are… so hypnotising. Flickering. Is it a reflection, or do they glow by themselves? What kind of witchcraft is it?

- Ami.

Whoooooaaaa!

The Secretary jumped, and the document almost slipped out of her hands.

Ouch! It would be a shame to damage one of the main clues.

With a sigh, the servicewoman set it down and moved towards the lobby window, where the frowning visage awaited her.

Oh. The documents!.. Damn it…

- Milo. I haven't...

- Never mind, - he waved off. - Go home, have some rest. Dismissed. Come to my office when you are ready. The room must be sealed.

“Pfft... Lucky us.”

Really lucky indeed.

“Better not risk doing it during work hours.”

Then, when?...

- Copy that. Going immediately. - exhaled with a sigh of relief the Kantinian.

The light was really disastrous.

“Copy. That. Ami.”

Get off. Just give me some time… Almost done…

…Copies did not shine, but she has them. Done!

She joyfully leapt upon the groaning chair. Not from a jumpscare this time, which is nice for a change.

She quickly stashed the coveted cloth in a small bag, not waiting for the writing juice to dry. Wow. Ami’s got a secret! It’s not so dull now.

She jumped out of the chair excitedly and headed for Milo's office.

Now she knows not how to defeat the willed entrance curtain but at least how to negotiate.

- Milo. Would you seal my office? Please.

The Station Chief put away the documents he studied and gave a rookie a trying look.

- I will. So. How’s your first working light? In general.

- Dreadful. But I will survive. I hope. Still better than seeing the hometown for now. In a sense, I picked a smaller issue.

- Good. This is life, one damn thing after another. And don't even expect them to stop until you're alive. Old ones go, new ones come. I've been running this place for quite some time, so I know it.

- Yes, thank you for reminding me. Though, I've never had as much stress in my operational work in the worst cases as I'm getting here… And this light was almost infinitely long, if it wasn't for the coffee. So endlessly happy to be dismissed.

Milo grinned mischievously.

- Alright. Go then. There's another troubled light tomorrow. And… more coffee, of course.

- Yeah. Cup by cup.

- Cup by cup.

Milo nodded and returned his attention to the documents.

There was a clay mountain of reports and cases on his desk. It was almost painful to see it, and Ami hoped that the chief would put them back in their places himself.

Alrighty. Time to head out.

Kantinian went out of the office, and Kantinian walked by the coffee table and enjoyed the scents that had not yet faded, stepped outside the Station and, after drawing back the entrance curtain, found herself almost blinded...

...by a bright world outside after the dark cabin.

She could see the second sunset staring down at her from the tops of the woodland. In Omill, where everything is so amazing, even the lights are brighter and the smells are sweeter.

...So awesome...

And you forget everything for a moment.

She'll never get used to it.

Now, it's hard to believe. She's in Omill, however. She is welcome to remain here. She has a copy of the shiny writings, shining suns tenderly touch her skin. She adores shinies.

Will she ever stop caring about shinies and all that? Most unlikely when she's not in Kantine, where you're forced to be a wretch.

Even if she's exhausted, she ought to go for a walk. Without the exhausting vagabond enthusiasm of the last few lights, which arose from despair and fear. It is the best way to calm down indeed. To walk yourself to death and wake up the next light as a new creature. With aching feet but a clear head.

And there's only one rule to follow—while your legs work, your head rests. Let's depart.

We have plenty of things to dive into.

Tastes. Views. Foods. Smells. Beverages. Interiors. Architecture. Paintings on the walls. The native language. Nature. Impressions.

That's quite a list. Enough to take a long time to study. Even if it’s not this light, we’re too tired to be interested. It will pass. Even if it feels like it’s not. Nothing lasts forever, not even happiness or suffering.

And we have a time. It’s short, but we’re lucky to have it.

The houses were still delightfully semi-circular. The

azure mountains and imposing mushroom landmarks remained. Coffee shops had the aroma of freshly made food and beverages.

An exhausted servicewoman measured the surface of the lovely city with her heavy, weary steps as she wandered through the city of marvels unnoticed and lost in her thoughts. A soulless body was moving. It's all in vain. She wants to spend some time at home.

“Then let's return home for a reunion of the body and the mind.”

“But we can have “fun” like that in our hometown. Was it worth it? Coming to another town to continue the same old meaningless life.”

“One meaningless light doesn’t mean a meaningless life. Don’t extrapolate.”

“She will rest, process the lots of new information, and the meaning will return.”

Going home doesn't seem very appealing to me either.

"Why?"

The unpleasant temporary residence needed some cleaning.

“Then no cleaning this light.”

So. We do nothing.

“Yes.”

Great.

When she ended up at her kotti, she went to her bed, lay down, and pulled her legs in to avoid tipping over the stack of her belongings and lay down, staring at one point.

“Sleep?”

No. Too anxious. Poppy. Heavy. Dreary. It won't go away on its own. I have to… clean up a little bit. No. I can’t.

“Lazy pants.”

Off you go. I can’t. I worked a lot this light.

Amelia sighed as she sat in bed.

She shifted her gaze to the pile of stuff and her camping bag. She could put everything in duffel bags. But where to put the bags themselves? The dirty floor was unsuitable for putting anything on, and it was now impossible to clean.

Dirty, dusty, and so cold after all suns set. Soooo uncomfortable...

The light had gone down, and the inner darkness went outside too. The inner darkness had moved outward as the light had dimmed. The glimmer of hope vanished, and the

future didn't seem so promising. It was just her and her bleak thoughts in the darkening room.

“It wouldn't hurt to bring some light in here. Just saying.”

But where to find it?

The Kantinian raised her eyes to the lifeless flask hanging in the middle of the kotti.

Witchcraft.

The Kantinian looked up at the lifeless flask that hung in the centre of the kotti.

Witchcraft.

All her life, she had been missing that. To create an exterior light, use an inner light. She is such an unenlightened individual.

The alien let out another deep sigh. Once more, she was unable to drag the light from outside. Or enlist the aid of others. She has to deal with it. Make it through whatever happens. It's something Kantinians excel at. Or, given their circumstances, they will be dead. Let's take advantage of our resources.

Additionally, we still have the slight ability to see objects in the semi-darkness that we acquired when walking in the forest.

She carefully pulled the duffle bags out of the pile, trying not to scatter the rest of the contents on the dusty floor. She can make herself feel better without standing on her feet for it.

Amelia roughly sorted the items into three categories by bag and set them on the wiped spot on the nightstand.

Already a great start. And they can do one more great thing.

She slid down on the dusty floor next to the washbasin, struggling to drag herself to it. I also did a little wiping here. Neat.

After rinsing her hands and brushing her teeth and having a while of staring dumbly into the water, she forced herself to close the basin plate, get up, and go to bed.

A nomad pulled herself into bed. Nice, warm, cosy...

But she couldn't sleep since her legs and shoulders became cold. It appeared that she would have a difficult time falling asleep, even though she was clearly relieved to be horizontal and felt somewhat protected from the harsh outside world by the plaid.

The heavy eyelids refused to shut.

It seems to exacerbate the situation. As long as there was even the slightest chance of escaping into her own thoughts and memories, into a series of pointless internal discussions, she didn't want to remain in the dark with herself.

And the never-ending, insomniac torment started.

The foreigner had no idea how long it took before her eyes were closed, and the images that showed up in front of them were yet another reason why she might not want to enter the dark recesses of her dreams and unconscious.

Was it darkness? No.

Now, diffused light filled the entire area surrounding her.

Ami glanced around.

She was sitting at the table for a family get-together. She turned nervously when she felt a shift in the air and noticed a shadow fall on the table, not realising that her mother was approaching from behind.

Yvette stood motionless and looked at her daughter with a heavy, probing gaze. Creepy. As always.

- Do you know what I realised just now? - she finally asked, after a dramatic, tense pause.

- What? - Amelia averted her gaze, indifferent, used to her mother's arrogant demeanour, but nonetheless annoyed by her unexpected attention.

She made an effort to ignore the unpleasant tension in the setting by focussing on the drink pitchers.

- I kept my notes for the glory of my ancestors... And you? Do you do anything for the glory of the ancients?

- Nn-no. - Ami shrugged her shoulders after a moment's thought. - Definitely no.

Unless... Hm.

Ami, humming thoughtfully and drawing a symbol on the table with her finger, started to recall whether she had ever done anything while under the influence of the dead. The disembodied. Always invisibly present...

...A whisper in her ear. No.

The chill slipping down her arm's flesh. Don't!..

No!.. She named them… But why? Leave!

No-no-no… They're… here.

She knows, she just knows it… They seeing her now…

Stop, stop the singing, Ami… Please stop.

She stopped singing abruptly and froze in terror.

…What?!..

Then she turned around quietly, opened her mouth

and... began devouring her mother. They started merging into a single mass, from which the sound eventually came:

“Hey. I'm not an empty spot.”